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23 bby

Dining at Dex's

A Message from the Proprietor

Welcome to Dex's Diner, where we're proud to offer the best eats in the Coco Town streets! We serve up good food and fast, friendly service at reasonable prices. From signature sliders to robo-fountain favorites, we've got something for everyone!

As the owner of this establishment, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you for your patronage and tell you a little something about the food you'll find on our menu. Many of the recipes we prepare I collected during my years roaming the hyperlanes in my previous careers. I've traveled the galaxy from the Deep Core to beyond the Outer Rim, and I've sampled cooking from countless planets.

As you can well imagine, interstellar dining can be dangerous -- for example, I found out the hard way that I'm allergic to both Dac anchovies and the Mon Calamari chef who'd prepared them. But for every meal that made me break out in green hives, I tasted countless others that brought a smile to my face. I knew I was destined for the restaurant business when on my prospecting expeditions I started getting as much satisfaction from discovering new foods as I was from finding valuable minerals. This menu is filled with the most delicious meals I've encountered over the years.

Being a seasoned galactic traveler, I know that no matter where you are, there's nothing that beats a good, home-cooked meal. So whether your home is just around the corner or parsecs away, we at Dex's Diner promise you the kind of cooking you'd get from your own maternal-being's kitchen.

Thank you for dining with us.

--Dexter Jettster

Breakfast

Favorites

Served with your choice of breakfast side dish.

nerfstreak and eggs

Start the planetary rotation off right with a juicy, grilled-to-order nerfstreak, a breakfast staple from here to Outer Zznza and everywhere in between. The secret to our mouthwatering nerfstreak is the seasoning: a unique blend of Serrian salt, tertium, punctil and black hole pepper that's been handed down in my family for generations. Served with two gartro eggs cooked to order.

12.5 credits

Quor'sav-fried steak and eggs

No, it's not made from a Quor'sav, so don't get any funny ideas. What we have here is a giant nerfstreak coated in seasoned pom seed flour and pan-fried to perfection using an authentic recipe from Uaua. We finish by smothering it in our special white dwarf gravy. Served with two gartro eggs cooked to order.

12.7 credits

"Besalisk's Bellyful" hash

I used to have a heaping serving of skillet-cooked hash for breakfast every morning during my days as a brawler on Ord Mantell. Talk about a hearty breakfast! This hash is made with a generous amount of bantha beef, Ojomian onions and protatoes. Even if you're not wrestling Mantellian savrips for a living, you'll want to give it a try.

8.5 credits

gartro egg omelet

Our delectable, fluffy omelets are prepared to your request. Enjoy our basic omelet, made from three Grade Aurek gartro eggs and filled with shredded jerba cheese, or add any of these favorite ingredients for a small charge: diced gornt, diced roba, Felucian glasscap mushrooms, Ferroan spinach, Bellassan peppers, Ojomian onions, topatoes or calarantrum root.

7.5 credits (additional ingredients are 5 decicreds each)

"Hungry Hutt" breakfast sandwich

I think Hutts get a bad reputation for their eating habits. It's true they have healthy appetites, but they aren't indiscriminate about what they eat. Many Hutt foods are quite delicious, including this "punky muffin" sandwich. A breakfast favorite on Nar Shaddaa, it features a poached gorg egg, Klatooine paddy frog sausage and a slice of jerba cheese on a pedunkee mufkin.

6.5 credits

From the Robo-Griddle

Served with your choice of breakfast side dish.

Panna cakes

Three fluffy hotcakes prepared just the way they make 'em on the red-water moon in the Panna system. Served fresh off the robo-griddle with bantha butter and carbosyrup.

4.5 credits

With zoochberries or ettel nuts *5.5 credits*

Iktotch toast

Three scrumptious, thick slices of egg-dipped Iktotchian gravelwheat bread cooked golden brown and dusted with powdered Christophsian sugar. Served piping hot with bantha butter and carbosyrup.

4.7 credits

With zoochberries or ettel nuts *5.7 credits*

Donuts

Our Adarian-style donuts are made fresh daily by a genuine Crisp-E-O donut droid. Bright and early every morning, our Crisp-E-O unit sorts through its database of more than 2,400 donut recipes to choose the delicious varieties to be made that day using its internal oil fryer. You never know when you'll discover a new favorite. (If you get the chance, be sure to try the dianoga

cream-filled donut--it's divine!) Of course, we always serve these crowd-pleasing standards as well:

powdered Christophsian sugar *1.5 credits*

Yowvetch custard-filled *1.7 credits*

muja fruit-filled *1.7 credits*

iced Trammistan chocolate *1.7 credits*

iced Endorian maple *1.7 credits*

iced with chopped ettel nuts *1.7 credits*

iced with shredded Ishi Tib-cracked coconut *1.7 credits*

iced with dark matter sprinkles *1.7 credits*

Breakfast Sides

nuna bacon (four slices) *3.7 credits*

nuna sausage (four links) *3.7 credits*

moisture farm-fresh blue buttermilk biscuit and gravy *3.7 credits*

Kessinnamon roll *3.7 credits*

Mustafarian toast with bantha butter and Andorian jelly *1.7 credits*

dry Dantooine cereal *2.5 credits*

galactic grits *2.5 credits*

stewed Dressellian prunes *2.7 credits*

fresh fruit (in season) *2.7 credits*

carbon-frozen fruit (year-round) *1.7 credits*

Sliders

Basic Sliders

Our signature menu item, served fresh off the grill! We start with a perfectly seasoned, hand-formed, 100 percent pure Mongo Beefhead patty--no additives or Gank fillers here--served on the finest trans-shipped, medium-density food-board available. These flavorful sliders are inspired by my travels across the galaxy, so no matter what your tastes are, you're sure to find something to

satisfy your craving! All sliders are served with our special garnish. Sernpidalian mayo-ketchup and Bimm mustard available upon request.

Coruscant slider

The classic! A grilled-to-perfection patty topped with all the fixin's--a slice of Gonzo yellow cheese, Revvien lettuce, topato slices, grilled Ojomian onions and B'omarr-style pickles.

6.5 credits (add double meat for an additional 5 decicreds)

Socorro slider

Enjoy the bold taste of Socorro's black sands and rugged Killee Wasteland with this well-done slider. We top a blackened patty with four pieces of crispy tailring bacon and the Monnoks' smoky steak sauce.

6.7 credits

Zeltros slider

Not for the faint of heart! This zesty slider features a patty topped with mouthwatering Zeltron pop-peppers, pink lettuce, magenta onions and spicy "pleasure planet" sauce.

6.7 credits

Vorzyd slider

Take a Cosmic Chance on a rich, flavorful slider inspired by the one and only Gambler's World. Our regular patty is topped with sautéed Vorzydiak mushrooms and three kibi strips. If you're craving something exciting, this is a safe bet.

6.7 credits

Khomm slider

Here's a slider for those who like things neat 'n tidy. We serve this one up with a single patty and a precisely measured amount of strider cheese sauce--nothing more, nothing less. It's perfection every time!

6.5 credits

Giju slider

Our biggest, most stacked slider! Piled high with two patties, triple cheese, deep-fried Tapani triangles, mega-leaf lettuce, a slice of algae-bread,

Boontaspiced mustard, plankton spread, larded neutrinos and a fried blubberbird egg, with a green jumbolive on top, it's just the thing to satisfy a Herglic-sized hunger.

7.7 credits

Talus and Tralus sliders

Two basic sliders at one great price.

9.7 credits

Specialty Sliders

Sorry, the Sulfurous Moon slider is no longer available due to multiple customer complaints.

Manaan slider

If you're in the mood for fish, this seafood slider features a grilled firaxan shark fillet in place of the standard patty, topped with Ahto City cheese, chewy Selkathian seaweed and relish squiggles.

6.7 credits

Agamar slider

This meatless option comes from a pleasantly rustic Outer Rim agriworld. The patty is made from Agamarian soybeans and topped with a thick slice of binka fruit and mugruebe spit-sauce.

6.7 credits

Lao-mon slider

Like the native Shi'ido, this slider can be just about anything. You name the ingredients, and we'll put it together for you.

7.7 credits

Raxus slider

You never know what you'll find on the junk heap of a planet that is Raxus Prime, and this slider's no different. Made with whatever leftovers we've got back in the kitchen, this slider is a surprise every time it's ordered!

6.7 credits

Lunch

Favorites

Served with your choice of lunch side dish.

nerfstreak sandwich

The Uscru District has countless high-end eateries, but when Mayor Acros-Krik gets a hankering for a good, old-fashioned nerfstreak sandwich, he hops an airbus and heads down to Coco Town for a visit to Dex's. Served sizzling hot with Red Nebula onions on a pseudograin roll.

8.7 credits (substitute synthsteak for an additional 5 decicreds)

shaak and cheese sandwich

One of my first jobs was as a street tout for a restaurant on the great starship yards of Fondor (which doesn't really have streets, but that's beside the point). I gave "friendly" advice to the shipyard's visitors--gullible tourists fresh off the Starspeeders were always the best targets--inevitably directing them to the restaurant I was fronting. This was my first exposure to the food service industry, and I picked up plenty of good recipes in the process, mainly because I was being paid in food. One of the best was this yummy sandwich, made with thin slices of tender shaak, melted Byss cheese and topato. Served on toasted or therm-zapped pseudograin bread.

6.7 credits

Shawda Clubb sandwich

This popular sandwich boasts sliced Manpha-fowl, nuna bacon, Revwien lettuce and topato. Served on toasted or therm-zapped pseudograin bread.

6.7 credits

Besh-Leth-Trill sandwich

Another classic sandwich, prepared just the way you'd get it back home, with crisp nuna bacon, Revwien lettuce and topato. Served on toasted or therm-zapped pseudograin bread.

5.7 credits

gartro egg salad sandwich

We make our egg salad fresh daily with hard-boiled Grade Aurek gartro eggs, tangy emulsauce, Boontaspiced mustard, taba leaves, Serrian salt and black hole pepper. Served on toasted or therm-zapped pseudograin bread.

5.5 credits

deluxe nutmeat and jelly sandwich

This is our recreation of the beloved childhood favorite, prepared with freshly ground ettel nuts and gourmet Andorian jelly. Served on bleached pseudograin bread.

4.5 credits

Endorian chicken pot pie

In all of my travels, I've never seen an animal stranger than the Endorian chicken, but it's not without its uses. We combine the bird's succulent meat with celonslay, space-carrots and Antarian peas, all baked in a flaky pom seed flour crust.

6.5 credits

scalefish fillets

Four flaky daggert fillets are dipped in batter, fried golden brown in aola and served on a bed of crunchy sea cabbage with our own secret-recipe Iskalonian tartar sauce.

6.7 credits

Soups

So good, you'd swear they were made by the Soup People of Tureen VI.

cream of fleek eel soup

These little babies pack quite a bite--literally! We promise that each bowl of this creamy soup is loaded with at least eight live fleek eels (or four eels per cup), each liberally coated in pepper oil. Your waitress will even serve the soup up with a quick shake to make sure the eels are lively.

1.7 credits (cup)

2.7 credits (bowl)

apple slug stew

During my time manning rigs on Subterrel, I'd occasionally use one of the low-volume mining sluices to prepare this tasty stew, made with ripe apple slugs, Ojomian onions, space-carrots and a pinch of negamo. Today, we make the stew more traditionally, in a pot on a nanowave stove, but it's just as flavorful as ever.

1.7 credits (cup)

2.7 credits (bowl)

Aurebesh soup

A flavorful topato soup with pasta shapes. Trill-aurek-senth-trill-yirt!

1.7 credits (cup)

2.7 credits (bowl)

nyork chowder

A delicious staple of the Gungan diet, this chowder is made from freshly shucked nyorks in a creamy broth with diced protatoes, Ojomian onions and celonslay.

2.1 credits (cup)

3.1 credits (bowl)

Salads

Prepared with laser-cut greens and appetizing toppings grown on locally-orbiting VegSatellites.

interstellar garden salad

Our most popular salad, featuring crisp Revwien lettuce garnished with topatoes, space-carrots, Qiraadishes, Mandalorian oranges, Sriluurian raisins and Wol Cabasshews. Served with Luptoomian dressing.

5.7 credits

With grilled gornt *6.7 credits*

herd ship's bounty salad

The nature-loving Ithorians know a thing or two about what makes a great salad. This is our take on the traditional covado salad--mixed Ithorian greens

garnished with starfruit and hard-boiled oogлата eggs. Served with Meerian vinaigrette.

4.7 credits

With hoyy seeds or liwi fruit *5.7 credits*

goatgrass salad

A mainstay of the Gran diet, but perfectly suitable for anyone wanting a light meal. We toss fragrant goatgrass with Malastarian croutons, houjix cheese crumbles and three-eyed Kinyenian potatoes.

4.5 credits

Xizor salad

Fresh Sizhranian lettuce tossed with Hocekureem Sea salt croutons. Fit for a Falleen prince!

7.7 credits

Lunch Sides

fiery Fornax rings *3.7 credits*

protato wedges *3.5 credits*

protato curls *3.5 credits*

old-fashioned protato salad *2.7 credits*

pashi noodles in Gonzo yellow cheese sauce *2.7 credits*

Revwien coleslaw *2.7 credits*

apple slug sauce *2.7 credits*

Umgullian blob gelatin *4.5 credits*

Dinner

Favorites

Served with a pseudograin roll and your choice of dinner side dish.

fried nerfstreak

It doesn't get any better than this--a massive, mouthwatering Alderaanian nerfstreak, cooked to order and smothered with melted jerba cheese, grilled

Ojomian onions and Felucian glasscap mushrooms.

14.7 credits

shaak pot roast

A favorite on Naboo and throughout the Chommell sector, slow-cooked in our gamma flux broiler with space-carrots, Ojomian onions, Anzati snot garlic and Deltron spice wine. When I cooked chow for a militia camp in the Lesser Plooriod Cluster, shaak pot roast was always very popular. I suppose it reminded lonely soldiers of the warmth of a good, home-cooked meal. Or maybe it was just better than the cans of Skakoan processed, additive-enhanced meat I served most other nights.

8.7 credits

Nana Bagwa's liver and onions

This recipe comes from the family of one of our waitresses. Hermione never liked it much as a child, but it's one of her favorite meals today. You haven't had mutant rat liver unless you've tried it Nana Bagwa's way!

7.7 credits

home-style proteinloaf

Who doesn't love a good proteinloaf? You get three thick slices of succulent proteinloaf made using a tried-and-true recipe and covered in our unique brown dwarf gravy. (The gravy can also be used as an industrial-strength lubricant in a pinch, if you ever have the need.)

7.7 credits

hot gizka sandwich

I spent a few years on a freighter hauling special cargoes in the Stenness Node, during which I dealt with my fair share of interstellar vermin: mynocks, space slugs, the Fabled Sirens of Lowick, you name it. Nothing beats gizka, though, when it comes to being a true pest. Fortunately, there is one way I like the critters, and that's thinly sliced and served hot over toasted or therm-zapped pseudograin bread.

7.7 credits

Gamorrean pork chop

A tender cut of pork imported directly from Gamorr, prepared with a tigmory

dry rub and pan-fried to perfection. Served smothered in rich snoruuk gravy.

9.7 credits

fried Endorian chicken

Four big pieces of Endorian chicken dipped in seasoned pom seed flour, then flash-fried in hot aola for maximum crispy deliciousness.

9.7 credits

grilled opee

A flaky opee sea killer fillet expertly seasoned with Roonan lemon and black hole pepper, served with a sprig of celto and our own secret-recipe Iskalonian tartar sauce.

9.7 credits

baby nos ribs

A hefty half-rack of nos monster ribs prepared in the traditional Pau'an manner of Utapau.

9.7 credits (extra charge if cooked)

Dractuvian cave slug

Limited availability. Please check with your waitress.

Dinner Sides

pickled gartro eggs (three eggs) *3.7 credits*

mashed protatoes *3.5 credits*

steamed space-carrots *2.7 credits*

topato (three slices) *2.7 credits*

acid-beet salad *3.5 credits*

baked Bith beans *3.5 credits*

Rishi corn on the inedible cellulose matrix *3.5 credits*

candied H'nemthe yams *3.5 credits*

Desserts

Favorites

Dex's Diner is the proud winner of three monosaccharide ribbons from the Tri-System Sugary Mass Bake-Off. You can't go wrong with desserts like these!

zoochberry cobbler

I first tasted zoochberries while trading furbogs along the Corellian Run. Through these exchanges I ended up possessing any number of unusual items: hyperdrive attenuators, silicon-pronged tack trim, Sullustan gab-rippers and--you guessed it--more zoochberries than I knew what to do with (a single furbog is worth ten times its weight in zoochberries, after all). I ended up eating zoochberries almost daily, and one of my favorite ways to have them was in a fine cobbler such as this one.

2.7 credits

With a scoop of denta bean ice cream *5.7 credits*

Kubindian royal jelly roll

The cuisine of the Kubaz may not be for everyone, but I guarantee you'll want to finish your meal with a thick slice of this scrumptious royal jelly roll. The filling is a tasty blend of worker zingbees, arthropinians and pectin-flies, and it's all dusted with powdered sun beetle chitin.

2.7 credits

sticky sweetmallow squares

A grown-up version of the kiddie favorite! Indulge your sweet tentacle with one of these giant, crispy squares today. Coated with charmed quark frosting, they're just about the most decadent treat you can find this side of the Zabian system!

1.7 credits

Pies

Sold by the slice.

wasaka berry pie

Enjoy a Wookiee-sized serving of this pie, packed with tangy wasaka berries in a flaky Kashyyyk wheat flour crust. We've already done the hard work of gathering and pitting the wasaka berries, so why not spoil yourself with a slice?

2.7 credits

With a scoop of denta bean ice cream *5.7 credits*

all-Almakian apple pie

Here's an old Leffingite favorite, made fresh from juicy, Kessinnamon-spiced Almakian apples baked to perfection in a golden pom seed flour crust.

2.5 credits

With a scoop of denta bean ice cream *5.7 credits*

namana cream pie

Made from a genuine Bakuran recipe, this pie features creamy namana custard topped with atomically aerated cream.

3.7 credits

Cakes

Sold by the slice.

Kowakian crumb cake

As with all our cakes, this old-fashioned favorite from Kowak is made from scratch using only the finest ingredients. The delectable cribblycrunch topping is sure to please even the most discriminating monkey-lizard.

2.7 credits

lego angel food cake

Named for the famed Diathim of the moons of lego, this light, sweet cake has an appropriately heavenly taste! (The trick for getting the cake so fluffy, we've found, is a little bit of patience and a good antigrav whisk.)

2.7 credits

Devaronian's food cake

I'll wager you never knew the Devaronians count baking among their many skills.

2.7 credits

Sic-Six-layer cake

Here's another crowd pleaser, a traditional dessert from Sisk featuring layers of moist cake ranging in color from infrared to ultraviolet. It's almost as good to

look at as it is to eat!

2.5 credits

Ice Cream

Whether it's a warm day or you simply sat next to a combusting Immolanoid during the morning commute, there's no better way to cool off than one of our ice cream treats.

double-scoop sundae

Enjoy a giant Neuvian sundae made the old-fashioned way with two generous scoops of denta bean ice cream and your choice of Trammistan chocolate or zoochberry topping. Served with atomically aerated cream and a zherry on top.

2.7 credits

Tibanna split

For the ultimate dessert, sample this deluxe, Cloud City-style dessert prepared with three massive scoops of Hood Family "Bespinian Best" Ice Cream--denta bean, Trammistan chocolate and beebleberry--and garnished with flavorful toppings, atomically aerated cream, crushed ettel nuts and real Ecclessis figs.

3.7 credits

soft ice cream

Smooth, creamy and colder than a wampa's whiskers, this is soft ice cream the way you remember it! Let our soft ice cream droid prepare you a Cerean cone with denta bean or Trammistan chocolate.

1.7 credits

Beverages

Favorites

Complimentary refills on all drinks.

Jawa juice

The best cup of Jawa juice I ever had was brewed by Ryn settlers on a nameless planetoid in the Corporate Sector. The settlers were having problems with some overzealous tax collectors and their Espo enforcers, and they hired me to

bring them certain goods and equipment so they could defend themselves. They offered me a small fortune in chrysopaz and aurodium in exchange for my services, but after one sip of their hot Jawa juice, made using an ancient Ryn technique with freshly roasted ardees seeds, I asked for the recipe and nothing else in return. I think you'll agree it's the best ever brewed.

1.5 credits

caf

Choose from regular or half-caf, freshly ground and brewed. Bantha cream and Christophsian sugar available upon request.

1.3 credits

stim tea

Choose from multiple tea varieties imported from across the galaxy, from scry-mint to Roonan lemon. Zingbee honey and Christophsian sugar available upon request.

1.5 credits

blue milk

Choose from whole or short-wavelength, served perfectly chilled.

1.5 credits (small)

2.3 credits (large)

fruit juice

Choose from pallie, muja fruit, Almakian apple, topato or Dressellian prune.

1.7 credits (small)

) 2.5 credits (large)

photon fizzle

This is one of several drinks I used to prepare while tending bar on Tyne's Horky with an old friend of mine from Ojom, a fine fellow named Doodnik. I've seen many different ways of making a photon fizzle, but no one did it better than Doodnik. We prepare ours the way he did, with just the right amount of regular or light quanta.

2.7 credits

giva jumbo

I have no idea why, but Doodnik would always serve this drink in a bowl, and so do we.

2.7 credits

supernova

Here's a bracing solar punch that was always a favorite of the miners on Tyne's Horky. It certainly packs all the wallop its name implies!

2.7 credits

circuit cider

Yet another of Doodnik's signature drinks, this cider is authentically made by filtering the liquid through spare droid parts before serving. Here at Dex's, the parts come from a dishwasher unit that once made the mistake of gossiping about our waitress droid with the other appliances. (I won't go into detail about what WA-7 did to the dishwasher unit when she found out, but suffice it to say, filtering drinks is about all it's good for these days.)

2.7 credits

From the Robo-Fountain

Our antique robo-fountain once stood in Old Doc 8H-QD9's Antivirus Software-Shoppe, a popular hangout for youths out cruising in speeders and engaging in awkward mating rituals. We've restored the device to its original working condition, offering you a chance to experience all the fun and romance of the Republic's golden age with every drink.

Fizzyglug

We proudly offer the full line of Fizzyglug products including Original Fizzyglug, Diet Fizzyglug, Zero Gravity Fizzyglug and the new Adegan Crystal Fizzyglug. For no extra charge, add any of the following flavored syrups to make your favorite drink combination: bilaberry, denta bean, Geldan sun-apple, Ishi Tib-cracked coconut, jewel-fruit, manta pear, nikkle nut, pallie, Roonan lemon, scry-mint, shuura fruit, sunberry, sweetmelon, Trammistan chocolate, zherry or zwil..

1.7 credits

blue milkshake

Our thick, creamy milkshakes are made the old-fashioned way, mixed by robotic appendage using Hoth-cold ice cream, blue milk and robo-fountain flavored syrups. I'm partial to the classic Blue Bantha, but we'll make your milkshake any way you like it. With a meal or as a treat by itself, this old-time favorite is sure to please!

2.7 credits

Pantoran Plate Specials

Breakfast Specials

Number 1: Diced roba and scrambled gartro eggs *5.5 credits*

Number 2: Anoat oats with two nuna bacon strips *4.7 credits*

Number 3: Creamed chipped bantha beef on Mustafarian toast *5.5 credits*

Number 4: Steamed phraig with two nuna sausage patties *4.7 credits*

Number 5: Ho'Din-style veggie omelet *5.5 credits*

Daily Soups

Primeday: Ranat's cheese soup *1.7 credits*

Centaxday: Callosian spring vegetable soup *1.7 credits*

Taungsday: Spicy Gargon gumbo *1.7 credits*

Zhellday: Creamed Rishi corn soup *1.7 credits*

Benduday: Aqualish hoi-broth *2.1 credits*

Lunch and Dinner Specials

Primeday:

Number 1: Nuna salad sandwich with cup of soup *6.1 credits*

Number 2: Kommerken flank steak and steamed ootoowergs *8.7 credits*

Centaxday:

Number 1: Molecularly agitated cheese sandwich with cup of soup *5.5 credits*

Number 2: L'lahsh-marinated nutrient globules with mixed Alderaanian vegetables *8.5 credits*

Taungsday:

Number 1: Togruta-style Shili cheese dog with cup of soup *5.5 credits*

Number 2: Braised brualiki brisket *8.7 credits*

Zhellday:

Number 1: Bantha burger with cup of soup *6.1 credits*

Number 2: Roast Smapp with hot barium liquid *8.5 credits*

Benduday:

Number 1: Fried Rokarian dirt-fish fillet sandwich with cup of soup *6.1 credits*

Number 2: Whole scrimpi in a cream-based glockaw sauce *8.5 credits*

Sorry, no substitutions.

About Dex's Diner

When I first arrived on Coruscant, I had nothing more than a second-hand Crisp-E-O donut droid and a dream . . . a dream serving good food to good folks.

I was tired of unfulfilling jobs that kept me constantly on the run from Corporate Sector police officers, gizka conservationists and Mantellian savrips who never learned how to lose a fight gracefully. My most recent enterprise, a weapon shop on the Outland Transit Station, had come to an abrupt (and nearly fatal) end, so the time was right for a fresh start. I spent the last of my savings travelling to Coruscant, where I opened a stand, Dex's Donuts, at the

corner of Zevanth Street and Avenue Peth. It was a humble start; I didn't have anything on the menu except donuts and fresh-brewed caf.

As you can imagine, it's not easy eking out a living selling food on the sidewalk. That's especially true on this crazy planet, where most of the speeder traffic is kilometers above your head and unlikely to notice a small donuts-and-caf stand. So after a few trying years, I started looking for a more conspicuous place from which I could work. My modest income from the stand made upgrading to a real restaurant seem impossible, though.

As luck would have it, around that time an inattentive driver landed his air taxi on Dex's Donuts. Admittedly, becoming a landing pad wasn't very lucky--the stand was a total loss, and I spent a week in a med center with a cracked cranial crest and three broken arms--but the settlement payment from the air taxi company was exactly what I needed. Suddenly flush with Republic dataries, I was able to purchase a small café with enough left over to renovate the place in a nostalgic style recalling the golden days of the Republic, complete with vintage furnishings. Dex's Diner was born, and we've been serving hungry Coruscanti ever since.

Incidentally, that Crisp-E-O unit I started with still works the breakfast shift. Now that I've found success, I suppose I could replace it with a fancy modern droid, but being fancy isn't what we do here at Dex's Diner. We may not have the best equipment or the cleanest 'freshers, but we promise you the best food you can get for your hard-earned credit.

Please enquire about our discounted prices for Jedi.

A 15% gratuity will be added for parties greater than seven (or three and a half Troigs).

The establishment assumes no responsibility for any beast-yeasts that may escape from the kitchen during food preparation.

Hondo Ohnaka'S Not-So-Big Score

It was a summer's day on Florrum, which meant the plains were baking, the generators were overloaded, and the last place Hondo Ohnaka wanted to be was a messy office crowded with unwashed Weequay pirates. And on top of everything else, the holoprojector refused to work no matter how many times the pirate boss whacked it with his fist.

"Master, you're hitting the off switch," objected 4A-2R, attempting to squeeze between the leathery-skinned Finn Tegotash and Goru. Tegotash, annoyed, shoved the bug-eyed protocol droid into Goru, who threatened the hapless mechanical with immediate disassembly.

"Four-aye, as soon as you're done provoking the gentlemen we'll get down to business," Hondo said.

One of Hondo's blows connected with the activation switch, and the pirates hooted appreciatively at the glossy, needle-nosed liner that now hung in the air above his desk.

"Our target is the Salin Mariner, traveling from Lianna to Botajef," Hondo said. "A C-One liner with eighteen passengers in first class, enjoying the finest hospitality that Salin Excursions has to offer."

Hondo raised his goggles and grinned.

"Oh, the sights they'll see along the fabulous Salin! The Fire Rapids of Mazuma! The Carpastor Comet Swarm! And at the end, a few lucky ones will visit the plains of Florrum and get an up-close look at a real working pirate base!"

Most of the pirates laughed and cheered - only Hondo's hasty warning kept Dagub Flask from firing a celebratory pistol shot into the light fixture. But a few of the Weequays looked confused.

"The trip to Florrum will come after we kidnap them from the ship and hold them for ransom," Hondo said, more slowly this time.

Now everyone was cheering - including the Kowakian monkey-lizard Pilf Mukmuk, cackling merrily from his usual perch on Hondo's shoulder.

"Be a pleasure blowin' a hole in that pretty boat," the massive Goru grunted. "We'll stop her dead, then plunder her at our leisure!"

Hondo cut short the cheers.

“Whoa now - an operation like this requires subtlety and finesse. We shall select our guests through personal inspection during the cruise. Once we have them picked out, we’ll arrange a diversion, bring the Mariner to a halt, and be in and out before sector law enforcement can arrive.”

“But I wanted to blow a hole in ’er,” grumbled Goru.

“Who’s gonna pick the lucky passengers, boss?” asked Tegotash.

“Ah,” Hondo said. “For that job we’ll need someone sophisticated and cultured, a refined traveler who can blend in with the upper-crust of galactic society.”

The pirates looked baffled.

“Hey, I’m talking about myself of course,” Hondo said. “Behold Rondo Rosada, import-export magnate and art collector!”

“But boss, won’t you need backup to take the hostages?” asked Flask.

“Our associate at Salin Excursions has arranged for three slots aboard the Mariner. Turk and Piit will be joining me on the cruise.”

The pirates stared enviously at Turk Falso and Peg Leg Piit. “Now that’s some high-class piratin’!” Sabo said, then began to guffaw. “Imagine ol’ Piit here decked out in the finery of a Sakiyan princess!”

Piit tossed her pigtail, offended. “I clean up jes’ fine. Unlike a grimy spice-goblin like yerself.”

Hondo whistled to cut short the resulting argument. “Alas! There is only one opening in first class. Turk and Piit shall be posing as crew, and assisting me - no doubt heroically - from belowdecks.”

“Belowdecks?” Turk wailed, jowl frills drooping.

“Belowdecks,” Hondo said. “Sanitation, to be specific.”

* * *

Hondo straightened the lines of his black velvet doublet, buffed his crystal monocle on his sleeve, then stepped onto the promenade deck of the Salin Mariner. Outside the transparisteel windows, the churning chaos of hyperspace swirled and seethed. But inside, a quartet from Far Dostany was playing a stately waltz, while liveried attendants hovered around the three tables, bringing cocktails and trays of dainties.

“Mr. Rosada?” asked a young human female wearing the ship’s livery. “Your tablemates are already awaiting you, sir. And can I get you something from the bar? Perhaps a Corellian Reserve?”

“Splendid,” Hondo said, blinking sleepily. Finding his well-appointed suite to his liking, he’d arranged for a pedicure - the better to show off his gaberwool slippers - and then enjoyed a long afternoon nap between shimmersilk sheets. “In fact, my blossom, let’s make it a double! I’m celebrating!”

“A double it is,” the attendant said with a smile, pulling out a chair at the center table. “And here you are, sir.”

Hondo settled himself in his chair and beamed at his tablemates - a blueskinned, near-human young Wroonian female and a fat older male in a maroon overcoat; a balding, bearded and horned Gotal; a grumpy-looking Siniteen with beady eyes and a bald head that looked like an exposed brain; and a salmon-skinned Bivall wearing jeweled clasps on his swiveling eyestalks.

“A fine evening to you all, gentlebeings,” Hondo said.

“I am Rondo Rosada, from - GREAT MOTHER OF QUAY. I AM BEING DEVoured!”

Hondo hopped away from the table, one slippered foot in his hand.

“Got your toes licked, did you?,” asked the older Wroonian, chuckling. “Higgs and Twiggs were just saying hello. Come out, you naughty boys!”

He lifted the tablecloth and two long, green-furred heads appeared, purple tongues flicking at the air.

“Daddy loves his Kobarian swamp dogs almost as much as he loves me,” simpered the Wroonian female. “Higgsie and Twiggsie are show dogs - a wedding present for me and my fiancée.”

“Worth a fortune,” her father said. “Part of my darling Pelf’s dowry. The marriage is arranged, of course - we’re not commoners.”

Hondo sat down again, waving away the attendants’ hands smoothing his doublet, and tucked his slippered feet safely behind the legs of his chair. His brandy arrived, and over appetizers he met his tablemates. The Wroonians were Pelf Pachoola and her father Fume, on her way to Botajef for her nuptials. The Siniteen, Sibs Monchan, was an entrepreneur who designed HoloNet interfaces, while the Bivall was Usk Haffa, who proudly proclaimed himself the largest owner of commercial real estate on Protobranch. The Gotal, Dix Tarfait, grunted that he was a small businessman and resumed a truculent silence.

“And what do you do, Rosada?” asked Fume, making kissing noises as he fed giblets to Higgs and Twiggs.

“Oh, I dabble,” Hondo said, signaling for another brandy. “Import-export, shipping and, ah, personnel acquisitions. It’s not much, but it’s enough to pay for the occasional pampering like this.”

“Don’t work myself,” Fume muttered, brushing a speck off his long coat. “Grandfather’s fortune spared me the indignity. Find the idea demeaning.”

“Speak for yourself,” grumbled Monchan without looking up from his datapad.

“My firm, Monchantics, cleared half a billion credits in net profit last fiscal quarter. Our initial public offering hits the Mileva Stock Exchange next month. All the product of hard work and vision.”

“I obviously haven’t worked enough,” Haffa said. “You may feel pampered, Mr. Rosada, but I am not impressed by our accommodations. The cabins are practically threadbare, the holos are last month’s, and while the bottles say Corellian Reserve, what they’re pouring is Vasarian.”

“I like Vasarian,” the Gotal grunted.

“Agree - this cruise is like camping,” Fume grunted. “At least we’re not losing the common touch.”

His tablemates chuckled and Hondo glowered at his brandy as attendants appeared with covered dishes. He decided not to assess the jellied gherks until informed of their deficiencies.

Hondo realized his napkin was still on the table and swept it into his lap. It seemed like there were far too many forks - goodness, the table was covered with them - and he peered over at Pelf, waiting to see which utensil she picked up. But she was warbling at her father about floral arrangements, while Haffa and Monchan were arguing about Trade Federation excise taxes. Nobody was eating, or showing any signs of doing so. Hondo’s stomach rumbled.

Clearly this called for another brandy, whatever the quality.

* * *

The next morning, his cabin spinning, Hondo staggered into the refresher’s sanisteam, where he decided after some debate not to drown himself. He donned his green velvet doublet, searched half-heartedly for his missing monocle, and made his way tentatively to the Mariner’s Vista Walk, cringing at each shockingly loud greeting from various attendants.

Outside the viewports, hyperspace was bright and nauseating. He checked to see he was alone and extracted his combination comlink and locator. The device was top of the line, designed to send an encrypted signal to Goru and the trailer ships.

Goru answered at once, and at a deplorable volume.

“Louder - they might not have heard you on Coruscant,” Hondo said. “We’ll stop the ship tomorrow night - after dinner of course. Are the mass mines ready for deployment?”

“Yeah, boss,” Goru said, more quietly this time. “They’ll haul ’er right out of hyperspace. But we’s having trouble finding suitable medic uniforms.”

Hondo sighed. “Uniforms? Why do you need uniforms? Once you’re aboard the ship you’re allowed to be pirates! Paint one of the attack shuttles in

emergency-response colors and memorize the script I gave you. You remember, the one about the quarantine on Phindar. Goru? Are you listening?"

"We could just blow a hole in the ship," Goru said plaintively.

Hondo sighed and leaned against the viewport, thinking he'd rest his eyes for a moment. Then something hit him in the chest, sending him staggering into the path of an exuberantly fleshed Ruebeqni matron who honked in alarm.

"HIGGSIE! BAD HIGGSIE!"

"Am-Shak's mattock! What fresh hell is this?" yelped Hondo, as the Kobarian swamp dog leapt on him again, leash trailing uselessly. His comlink flew out of his hand and Higgs snatched it from the air as Hondo fell on his backside.

"Higgsie! Sit this instant!" commanded Pelf.

Higgs belched and obediently settled on his haunches, while Twiggs began to lick Hondo's face with long swipes.

"Twiggsie! Sit!" Pelf said. "The boys are just glad to see you, Mr. Rosada! And so am I! You were so funny last night! You kept pinching my cheeks and saying I was precious!"

Hondo rose shakily, offering the comlink-devouring Higgs a murderous glance. "Well, so you are, my little blue dumpling."

Pelf tittered and shook a finger at Hondo. "You said you wanted to kidnap me and hold me for ransom! I don't think my fiance would like that very much, Mr. Rosada!"

"Ah," Hondo said. "Heh. You shouldn't listen to dinner-party chatter - it'll go to your pretty cerulean head."

"Over dessert you announced you adored the entire table and planned to kidnap us all!" Pelf said. "That was before you decided it was time to speak to the band."

"Speak to the band?" Hondo asked.

“Oh yes! You announced that if you had to suffer through another dull minuet you’d seize the helm and fly us into the nearest sun. Then you threw a stack of credit chips at the band and ordered them to play nothing but scrak and smazzo. You never said you could dance, Mr. Rosada!”

“I have been known to cut a rug or two,” said Hondo, wandering over to give Higgs an experimental smack in the ribs.

“I’ll say! You put on quite a show - well, at least until you catapulted Dame Malitikis into the dessert cart. But the surgeon says her shoulder will be good as new.”

Higgs, tired of being thumped, growled at Hondo.

“Easy, Mr. Rosada - Higgsie isn’t a drum!” Pelf said. “Well, I have party appetizers to pick out. See you at lunch!”

* * *

Hondo arrived as lunch was ending, his thunderous headache reduced to a dull throb by a late-morning nap and a carafe of caf. The banquet hall fell silent as he walked in, and the quartet missed a cue. Then the chatter picked up again and the musicians pivoted into a sunny waltz. Glowering, Hondo stalked to his seat. The Pachoolas were arguing about invitations, while Higgs and Twiggs snored contentedly in the aisle.

“Ah, Mr. Rosada,” Monchan said with a smile Hondo found slightly mocking. “Usk and I were just discussing union troubles. We figured a cultured businessman such as yourself must have an interesting take on employee relations.”

Hondo decided two things right then and there: He wasn’t in the mood to be mocked, and he was doubling the ransom on Monchan and Haffa.

“Get yourself a gundark,” he growled. “You want an established matriarch - as in every culture, they’re the meanest. Take the troublemaker with the least talent and throw him in the hole with her while everyone else watches. After she’s torn off his arms, complaints will magically cease.”

“You’re speaking metaphorically of course,” said Dix Tarfait.

“Metaphors, bah - I am a man of action!” Hondo said, bringing one fist down on the table and making the excess forks jump.

The surly Gotal smiled, showing his flat yellow teeth.

“I distribute liquor and spirits - my territory covers five sectors. A gundark would prove useful on sales calls.”

The female attendant appeared at Hondo’s side. “Mr. Rosada! What an eventful cruise you’ve had so far, sir!”

“Eventful? Heh! I’m just trying to keep things interesting.”

“We’ve arranged a surprise - a holographic exhibition of Saffa paintings over dessert. Now don’t be bashful, Mr. Rosada! You did say on your passenger questionnaire that you were an expert on Saffa paintings!”

A waiter tripped over one of the swamp dogs, sending a tureen flying.

Monchan stared at Hondo. “Saffa paintings? Really? You don’t seem the type, Mr. Rosada.”

“Oh, I hate to brag. Humility is a virtue - that’s what Mom taught me.”

“I’m sure,” Monchan said. He whispered something to Haffa, who smirked.

Three attendants guided in levitating terminals displaying shimmering paintings, all slashing lines and whorls and colors that made Hondo’s head hurt worse.

“Ooh, pretty,” Pelf said, peering at the paintings.

Hondo cursed whatever whim had brought Saffa paintings into his brain when confronted with the empty spaces of the questionnaire. But then the talk of art reminded him of an annoying Nouane philosopher Sabo had grabbed off a passing liner.

“Swamp dog got your tongue, Mr. Rosada?” asked Monchan. “Please, enlighten us about what we’re looking at.”

Sabo had looked stunned when Hondo explained that fancy talk didn't mean a being had two credits to rub together, while the philosopher's babbling had proved so annoying that he really had wound up in a gundark hole. But what had been his name? Hondo couldn't remember.

"Mr. Rosada?" Monchan inquired. "I asked if you recognized the period of this Saffa painting."

Hondo decided to triple the ransom on Monchan.

"Your question, Mr. Monchan, reveals the difference between looking at art and understanding it," Hondo harrumphed. "What period is this? What medium is that?"

These annoying little facts are not knowledge, or wisdom! They are just noise! Which is the opposite of appreciation! Pelf, look at this painting here. Tell me what you see, my delectable azure cupcake."

"Urn, it's red? Red and green and squiggly! Is it a deek-paneek out for a swim?"

"Ha - there you have it, Monchan," Hondo said. "A what-she-said out for a swim. That is artistic sensitivity - not your scavenger hunt for facts. You asked me to explain Saffa paintings and I cannot - for no one can! But I'm afraid Saffa paintings have done an excellent job of explaining you."

Monchan blinked at Hondo, who folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, smiling.

Then Pelf began to shriek, arm extended, mouth a horrified O.

"Who is that?" she squeaked, pointing at a woman on the other side of the room in an elaborate orange dress that reminded Hondo of a carnivorous night-flower from Forlonis Minor.

"Why Miss Pachoola, that's the Mariner's apprentice pastry chef," the attendant said. "She's just bringing in the new dessert cart."

"DADDY!" wailed Pelf. "HER DRESS! IT'S THE SAME DRESS AS THE BRIDESMAIDS'!"

The sleeve of Fume's maroon coat was instantly wet with tears. He whispered something consoling to his daughter.

"NO, IT WILL NOT BE ALL RIGHT! A PASTRY CHEF ON A THIRD-RATE LINER IS WEARING THE SAME DRESS AS MY BRIDESMAIDS!"

"Apprentice pastry chef," Hondo said helpfully, signaling for a brandy.

"MAKE IT STOP, DADDY! MAKE HER GO AWAY FOREVER!"

Higgs and Twiggs roused themselves and began to howl. Hondo plugged that ear with a finger and leaned across the table to Dix Tarfait. "Liquor distributor, eh?"

* * *

With Pelf still in distress, Hondo volunteered to take Higgs and Twiggs for their afternoon constitutional around the Vista Walk. The swamp dogs alternated snuffling at things and leaping on Hondo, who fended them off with Huttese imprecations while waiting for the steward to arrive.

Hondo decided not to kidnap Pelf - the thought of her shrieking in a cell on Florrum made his head pound all over again. But Tarfait would make a fine substitute. A liquor distributor, a Wroonian aristocrat, a HoloNet magnate and a real-estate mogul - yes, those four would do nicely. Now if only the idiot steward would shake a leg and -

"Mr. Rosada?" asked a young, goggle-eyed human in Mariner livery. "I heard your animal companion needs an emetic?"

"Urgently," Hondo said, taking the vial and slipping the steward a credit. "Always eating things he shouldn't! Higgs, you rascal - didn't I tell you your tummy would get you into trouble?"

He wasn't sure how one convinced a Kobarian swamp dog to take medicine, but the two beasts spotted the vial and started to yip eagerly. Hondo tried to remember which was Higgs and which was Twiggs, then threw up his hands.

“What am I, a veterinarian?” he asked, uncapping the vial and emptying it on the floor.

Higgs and Twiggs lapped up the emetic, then wagged their tails and licked their chops. Nothing happened for a minute or so, but then the two swamp dogs stopped swishing their tails, looking more puzzled than usual. A moment later, Hondo had retreated to the end of the leashes, eyes squeezed shut, while the other passengers were fleeing the Vista Walk as if a gang of Merson slavers had just smashed through the viewports.

Hondo opened one watering eye wide enough to spot his gleaming comlink in the mess regurgitated by Higgs and Twiggs, who hung their heads apologetically. He took a step forward, one hand fumbling in front of him, then began to gag.

“What do those people feed you?” Hondo gasped. “Mynock knuckles marinated in speeder lubricant?”

That was it: Fume and his valuable swamp dogs were staying behind too. Higgs and Twiggs’ digestive fluids might render half of Florrum uninhabitable.

Hondo spotted the horrified-looking steward on the other side of the Vista Walk, plotting his getaway.

“Don’t stand there like a stunned nerf!” he yelled, snapping his fingers. “Call Sanitation!”

* * *

“Did you hear that?” demanded Tarfait. “We’ve come out of hyperspace.”

“I’m sure it’s routine,” Hondo said with a yawn.

He was almost sorry that his time with his tablemates was ending. He’d spent the third day not fretting about forks, not allowing Pelf’s meltdowns to jangle his nerves, nor dissecting Monchan’s questions for concealed insults. Instead, he’d strolled the Vista Walk and napped and told Porla the Hutt stories and dined and had many refills of Vasarian, which he decided he liked just fine.

And now it was all ending, he thought, checking his chronometer.

Hmm. In fact, it should have started ending already.

Hondo excused himself and ducked into the refresher, where a doleful attendant in Mariner livery was stationed by the sink.

"Is the very concept of privacy extinct?" Hondo demanded. "Shoo!"

"It's my job," the attendant objected.

"Behold the miracle of opposable thumbs! That means I can wash my own hands and get my own Cardellian mint!"

A flung credit chip hastened the attendant's departure and Hondo extracted his comlink - which still bore a disagreeable whiff of swamp dog stomach.

"Goru? What's taking so long?"

"Mines fired as planned, boss," Goru said. "But the captain ain't allowin' us on board. Think he don't believe us."

"If there's one thing I dislike it's a skeptic. Did you follow the script?"

"Well... some pages got lost, so me an' Gwarm improvised."

"What have I told you about improvising?"

Goru sounded alarmed. "Boss! Sector forces are inbound!"

Hondo sighed. "I'll take the captives out in an escape pod."

"But the diversion -"

"Oh, just blow a hole in the ship."

* * *

When the Mariner shuddered, Hondo was ready.

“That was a missile impact or I’m a bantha cub,” he said, finishing his brandy. “Everyone follow me. Quickly and quietly - let’s not cause a panic.”

Tarfait was on his feet. Pelf gasped and then clapped a hand over her mouth. Monchan and Haffa exchanged a worried look.

“Nothing to fear, gentles - everybody remain calm while I investigate,” he told the rest of the first-class passengers, then lowered his voice. “Make for the escape pods in the starboard companionway.”

To Hondo’s annoyance, Pelf clamped herself onto his arm, eyes wide with terror. Sensing her distress, Higgs and Twiggs began howling.

Hondo thumbed open the escape pod hatch. In the distance, he heard shouting and footsteps.

“Mr. Tarfait, follow me to freedom!” he said, seizing the startled Gotal and flinging him into the pod. “Monchan! Haffa! Make haste!”

“Eject into a combat zone?” Monchan asked. “Are you mad? I’m heading for the safe room at Junction Besh.”

“As am I,” Haffa said.

“No time to argue!” Hondo said.

“Agreed,” Monchan said. “So long, Rosada.”

“You’re right - take Miss Pachoola with you,” Hondo said.

“That screeching lunatic?” Monchan said over his shoulder. “She’s your problem.”

“I want off this ship!” Pelf wailed. “Women and children first!”

“Pelf, my sapphire treasure -” Hondo began, but Pelf had already scrambled into the pod.

Higgs and Twiggs began to bark. Turning, Hondo spotted Turk and Piit hustling down the passageway, pistols raised. Before Hondo could call out to them, they dodged around Monchan and Haffa.

“No! Stop those two!” Hondo yelled.

“No time, boss!” Turk yelled. “The captain’s handed out weapons! And Sector Patrol just came out of hyperspace. Run for it!”

Turk and Piit pushed past him into the now-crowded pod. Scowling, Hondo followed them. Fume, eyes wild, remained in the corridor with Higgs and Twiggs.

“Pelf!” Hondo yelled. “Stay with your father!”

“NO! DADDY! DON’T LEAVE ME!”

“Let me out!” complained Tarfait.

“Turk!” Hondo yelled. “Hit eject!”

A frantic Fume shoved his way into the pod. Hondo tried to push him back out into the corridor, only to be knocked flat by Higgs and Twiggs, who pinned him down and began to lick his face.

“Turk, hit eject,” Hondo said with a sigh, activating his comlink.

The pod rocketed away from the Salin Mariner, then began to tumble.

“We made it!” Pelf screeched. “I hope Higgsie and Twiggsie don’t get space-sick!”

“Oh no,” Hondo said.

* * *

Hondo and Turk watched as the freighter disappeared into the sky above Florrum. The captain who’d delivered the Vasarian brandy had protested mightily when ordered to take Fume, Pelf and two swamp dogs in addition to

Tarfait, but an impressive number of guns aimed in his direction had halted his complaints.

“How many credits did we pay and how much time did we waste in exchange for eight cases of grog?” asked Turk disgustedly.

“Bah - math is for schoolboys and accountants, not dashing pirates like us,” Hondo said.

“The girls fiance said we could keep her. The old man said he’d rather die here than pay us. The swamp dogs ate ten kilos a day. And the Gotal lied about having money.”

“Hey, he was rich enough to fetch eight cases of grog,” Hondo said. “Plus Mr. Pachoola was persuaded to leave behind this excellent overcoat.”

“I forgot about yer fancy garment,” Turk snorted. “Guess that makes this a triumph, then.”

“The difference between you and me, Turk, is that I am a boundless optimist,” Hondo said. “Today, Florrum - and this coat, and this grog. Tomorrow, the stars!”

“Yer an optimist because yeh didn’t have to work Sanitation. Or clean up swamp-dog sick.”

“Try not to live in the past, Turk,” Hondo said. “It’s bad for your disposition.

22 bby

Arkanian Chill

Part 1: A Cold Reception

Day 13? Arrived on Arkania. Fairly confident Farg is NOT supposed to be this cold. Farg has tracked the traitorous Sakiyan witch across many parsecs, and to come here, to such a cold world, does not make Farg happy.

There is not much on Arkania that is good. Lodgings are tolerable, but

Farg prefers to stay on his ship. The people are ugly, even for Human stock. They are not normal Humans, something about their eyes is wrong. Farg suspects they bleed as most Humans do, though. The truth will be revealed if one more of them approaches Farg to request paperwork. They seem to believe that because they exist on a frozen rock, mining frozen rocks and twisting the nature of things with their sciences, they are better than Farg.

They are wrong.

Arkanians are very tight. Their mouths turn down, almost always, but their chins point upward. Farg is glad to have landed in a small settlement, because too many such arrogant individuals might cause him to become violent. Or perhaps even this small number may bring about violence, but they are few enough that they pose no threat to Farg. If they harbor the Sakiyan witch, they will be made to pay. If they cooperate, they will be allowed to continue living.

Appointment with an individual who believes himself even more important than the rest approaches. Will report on outcome.

Amazing arrogance in that one. It was very much wanted by Farg to do the man harm, but Farg resisted, and the calm returns. The Arkanian is called the Hyrim Focela, and he is older than one of his bearing has a right to be. He is Security Master of this blip that fancies itself a starport, this "Novania" with its 2,000 chin-tipped fools and its frigid temperatures.

Farg remains confident he should NOT be this cold.

The Hyrim Focela knew of the Sakiyan witch. She landed here five days ago, purchased a speeder, and left to cross the tundra. The direction he indicated is not the direction in which Farg feels her presence. She has turned aside and is moving to the north. Now that Farg has made his way here, she will be Farg's. The hunt nears its end.

Part 2: Hyrim Focela

Day 15 - Sakiyan witch is not moving, has not moved again since Farg arrived on this spinning ice-sphere. Changed direction, moved for a time, stopped. No speeders available. Every speeder in Novania is gone or under repair. Farg would take his ship out over the tundra and search for the witch,

but he believes the Hyrim Focela is hiding something. If the Hyrim Focela shows himself to be treacherous, Farg will have to kill him, which would be unfortunate for the Focela.

Farg meets with the Focela after noonmeal. As ugly and unpleasant as Arkanians are, Focela is more unpleasant still. His nose is too large, his hair is too white, and his teeth are too straight. Farg does not trust him and is almost hopeful that the Focela will give him reason for violence. Sitting and waiting for a speeder is not the way of the Findsman. Neither, though, is rash action; the hunt is an art, and above all things, must be treated with reverence. Rushing the hunt will lead one into the beast's lair too soon, and Farg has no desire to be eaten by the Sakiyan witch.

It is impressive to Farg how anything can be bought on this spinning ice sphere, including the Focela. The man makes much noise with his too-pink mouth. He speaks as though he has power and authority, which Farg supposes he might. The Focela is a man of some importance, as he controls the flow of information. He found something objectionable about Farg's presence, but a donation to the coffers of Novania quieted the Arkanian fool's mouth, at least for a time.

All the while, the Focela remained reasonable. Farg was almost disappointed that killing did not prove necessary. Too much sitting and waiting, when Farg should have been hunting the Sakiyan witch.

Now Farg has a speeder. Now the Sakiyan witch will be made to pay.

Part 3: Ice Palaces

It would make Farg a poor Findsman not to know where the Sakiyan witch is, now. Farg has made a full circle around the area in which the Sakiyan has hidden. Initial examinations show nothing but ice. This puzzled Farg, but only for a moment. The ice is white and silver, from here to the horizon. All of it looks the same. And yet, in the center of it, is the Sakiyan, and she is alive. For now.

Alternate imaging techniques indicate that there is a structure in the ice, recessed and so perfectly camouflaged that Farg failed to see it with his

own optical array. Camouflage does not hide the Force, though, and the Sakiyan remains tied to the Force, as are all things.

Other creatures are present inside the structure. It is a busy place, and initial surveys indicate it may be well-defended. Farg will meditate this night in preparation, and in the morning will enter this strange structure.

Part 4: The Re-Engineered

If Farg had not captured a worthless Arkanian scientist near the entrance to this strange place, Farg might have had some difficulty approaching his objective. Fortunately, the mouth-breathing fool has assisted Farg in avoiding numerous unpleasant security measures, and he will likely live to be disciplined by his superiors after Farg finds and eliminates the Sakiyan witch.

There is a strangeness here, though. There are things within these walls that should not be. Farg has asked the scientist what it is that he has done here, and he speaks as though he were one with the Force. "We have made life."

He is small and pale and fragile, but Farg would not have thought him insane. Still, there have been stranger things Farg has seen in the galaxy than an insane scientist. Arkanians have such a reputation.

But the things Farg feels - - they are living, but they are not right, in the eyes of the Force. Farg senses them sometimes, beyond walls, waiting. They are hunters, but not hunters of the art. They are hunters who revel in the kill, and not the mystery of the hunt itself. Whatever has been created here, it is not something that is right.

The Sakiyan witch is moving! I must move quickly, or all will be lost.

Thyferra: Bacta Basics

Part 1: The Thriving Season

Decades before the Empire rose to power and placed de facto control of the planet in the hands of two companies, Thyferra - - homeworld of the

insectoid Vratix - - was one of the most economically volatile worlds in the Republic, in no small part because of its uniqueness. Thyferra, of course, is the only known source of pure bacta, the miracle fluid that can heal almost any wound short of dismemberment or disintegration. (While Vratix colony worlds produce bacta in other sectors, few believe any of these colonies would last a single year without support from Thyferra and the Bacta Cartel.)

For hundreds of years, since at least the time of the last great Sith war, the Thyferran government was largely an extension of two major bacta-production corporations - - Xucphra and Zaltin, both owned outright by Human interests in the Core. Under these small bureaucracies, millions of Vratix labored to create bacta, ostensibly without complaint. Indeed, to most in the corporate world, the arrangement seemed too good to be true. The Vratix didn't need to be coaxed into doing the bulk of the work; the insectoids didn't even want to run things. And since the creation of bacta was impossible without certain natural chemicals produced by the Vratix themselves, they knew they could not be removed from the equation by force. It seemed a perfect arrangement, so long as the Vratix felt they were being treated more or less fairly.

Just before Palpatine was elected Chancellor, a string of scandals involving corporate payoffs to a nominally Vratix-controlled government erupted, followed soon after by the revelation that Xucphra and Zaltin corporations, the behemoths that together formed the Bacta Cartel, had sabotaged their own alazhi fields in an effort to hike the price of bacta galaxywide. These shocking events inspired the usually anti-bureaucratic natives to take a more active role in their planet's government, showing concern about Thyferra's standing in the galaxy at large in what even corporate opponents saw as an elegantly bloodless coup.

For about a ten-year period after the Trade Federation's defeat at Naboo - - a time called Alazhixazha (or "Thriving Season") by the Vratix, and the "Vratix Occupation" by galactic corporate interests - - Xucphra and Zaltin were forced to toe the Vratix line. The insectoids forced the Cartel to compete with a number of local companies and "alien" business interests, even the Hutts, in a freewheeling open market that saw consumer awareness of the wonder medicine skyrocket from the Rim to the Core.

For this single decade in the last thousand years, Thyferra's capital regained its ancient Vratix name, Xozhixi. Humans still ran many of the

administrative bureaucracies on Thyferra, especially those involving business, but the Vratix watched them like hawkbats. And at least one Human worked directly for the Vratix revolutionaries who would one day be known as the Ashern or "Black Claw" insurgent group, still in its infancy.

The Thriving Season is still a popular and colorful setting for many gritty holosericals well into the New Republic period, but the most legendary tale is actually a true story. Not long after the Bacta War, the infamous Human spy still known only as the Bloodletter released his (or her) memoirs of life at the time, *Thrive or Die*. The following holotranscripts were read personally by Bloodletter via closed-circuit holo (Bloodletter's voice was disguised), transmitted from an unknown location, and they have recently gone on display at the New Republic Historical Archive on Coruscant. Though the Bloodletter is no doubt well into his or her golden years, his or her identity remains a mystery - - most likely on Thyferra itself.

This month, a section of the author's introduction to *Thrive or Die*.

Thrive or Die: Memoirs of the Bloodletter

Dear [REDACTED] Graduate,

You've put in the hardest six years of study in your life. And what have you got to show for it? Endless loan payments and a mountain of student debt. A "competitive" market for dead-end Hutt accounting jobs on the Outer Rim. And a family demanding to know how their investment in your education will pay off.

But you don't have to settle for a life of toil and struggle. Consider the Xucphra corporation, located conveniently on the tropical Inner Rim paradise planet Thyferra. We're always looking for qualified Humans - - and only Humans - - to join the Xucphra team. Recent events have led to a staffing shortfall, and we're offering an extremely lucrative hiring package for [REDACTED] graduates that fit your profile.

Please consider attending our informative seminar at [REDACTED] on [REDACTED]. We're sure we've got a position waiting for you.

The seminar had indeed been informative, more than Xucphra knew. Their methods were not noticeably different from the Zaltin recruiters, with whom I

had met weeks before.

The Bacta Cartel is like a gargantuan broken family. They're forced to stay together for financial reasons, a joint operating agreement that chafed especially hard during the Thriving Season. It was all the two companies could do to share financial information and for corporate officers to remain civil. Hiring records, recruitment efforts, and employment figures were still held closely secret by each side.

It was the perfect time for a smart third-party operator to play both ends against the middle. And that's exactly what the Vratix wanted me to arrange. I accepted the job once they doubled my pay and offered me permanent asylum should anything go wrong.

But I would have done it anyway. I'm the Bloodletter, and I work for the side with the most credits.

Part 2: Ashern to Ashern

The self-described "freelance corporate espionage specialist" known as the Bloodletter worked for both sides of the Bacta Cartel - - as a double-agent for the young Ashern revolutionary group - - during the heady time known on Thyferra as the Thriving Season. During this brief period (which coincided almost exactly with Chancellor Palpatine's first ten years in office), Thyferra's bacta market was freed from absolute Cartel control, an era that most believe was a direct result of a Vratix uprising that saw them retake their own government and planet, even if only for ten years. Now the Bloodletter's memoirs finally shed more light on how the Vratix took Thyferra back, and how they lost it again.

This month's installment, transcribed from portions of a new NR Historical Archive exhibit, describes further details of the Bloodletter's mission in Thyferra during the Thriving Season.

Thrive or Die: Memoirs of the Bloodletter

Excerpted from Chapter 3: Hive-Bound

With a pair of separate cover identities established for both Xucphra and Zaltin consumption, it was time to get to work. The Vratix that hired me to

infiltrate the Cartel - - they called themselves the Asherns, or Razorclaws, something like that - - spared no expense ensuring that both [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] had complete educational histories, references that would actually hold up, and even two separate families - - one on [REDACTED] and another on [REDACTED]. Of course, I hadn't given them any choice in the matter. I wouldn't take the job until those safeguards were in place. I feel not a whit of shame when I say that ultimately the Bloodletter's first and only client is the Bloodletter. That's why I have never spent longer than an hour in any prison, and then only twice.

I must admit that Thrax, my primary Ashern contact, was the one who hit upon a believable way for me to work full-time for each company, a problem that had been posing some difficulty even for me. Xuczal City - - recently renamed Xozhixi - - was a company town, at least during daylight hours. Most Humans spent their entire careers within the city limits, and a Human only willing to work half-weeks would raise too many eyebrows, considering my ultimate goal. A Vratix

Instead, I would take work for each company as a field inspector, one of the few jobs in bacta production that both Vratix and Humans performed in equal numbers. I suspect it's because neither species really trusts the other, and they shouldn't. If trust was possible, I wouldn't be here. Field inspectors, as the name implies, roved the planet ensuring that the alazhi plants were healthy, watching for blights and other plant diseases, and enforcing proper harvesting methods. Usually, only Vratix field inspectors bothered to monitor the actual process of bacta creation, so I didn't bother to go underground; that would only have attracted attention. But I didn't need access to bacta production facilities to get my job done. I simply needed to be able to move about freely and access both Xucphra and Zaltin records. My primary mission involved the alazhi, which grew aboveground. I went into each office once a week (officially) to file reports, but otherwise I could move about with impunity.

I'm not normally a nature lover. My business is business, and business is rarely conducted in the middle of a rain forest. But even I have to admit that the natural splendor of Thyferra, even with well over half the world covered in alazhi fields, was magnificent. From the air, the planet appeared completely uninhabited except for Xozhixi and a few other small settlements. That's because the most industrial work in the bacta industry - - aside from bureaucratic wheeling and dealing - - was done underground, by Vratix

laborers. As for their own homes, the native villages and towns were built into the trees of the rain forests that covered every landmass, connected by long sloping archways and artistically designed paths allowing easy travel for anyone with four legs and two arms. It reminded me of Kashyyyk, redesigned by giant bugs.

Seeqov Thranx herself was to be my partner, which was convenient, if a little dangerous. Vratix are hermaphrodites, but hundreds of years of contact with Humans means that metropolitan Vratix like Thranx usually identified more with one sex than the other.

I don't like working with partners and very nearly quit on the spot. I knew nothing about the Seeqov hive-clan or Thranx herself. But, in the end, I decided that I couldn't avoid getting saddled with at least one of them, and I'd already seen enough of Thranx to know we'd work well together. For one thing, she's a wicked sabacc player - a rare enough challenge anywhere, let alone on this giant hive of a planet.

Though an operative for the Ashern, Thranx did have a long and legitimate career as a field inspector and research scientist. She was known planetwide for helping to eradicate a Rodian fungus epidemic that threatened the entire harvest of the southern hemisphere just five years ago. (The entire incident was kept secret from the galactic public and, according to Xucphra and Zaltin records, they each separately solved the crisis without Vratix help. They can say what they want, but I know the truth). Around this same time, she was first contacted by the fledgling Ashern and recruited into the movement. Since then, she's become a master of something alien to the hive-minded creatures -- deception. Unlike most idealists, she was able to see the situation from all sides.

Of course, not even Thranx saw the Empire coming. I did, naturally, but no one ever asked me.

Part 3: Fields of Dreams

According to his or her memoirs, the following incident took place only nine years before the Clone Wars erupted on Geonosis. The Bloodletter's assignment was long-term, and after over a year of work, the objective was in sight.

Thrive or Die: Memoirs of the Bloodletter

Excerpted from Chapter 9: Killing Field

The Ashern were a smart bunch. They saw that the Vratix couldn't possibly hold onto the kinds of freedoms and planetary control they had during the Thriving Season unless they were willing to get into the ditch with Xucphra and Zaltin. The newly elected Vratix government seemed to mean well, but the Ashern saw, correctly, that allowing even more alien intervention (and interference) in their planetary economy would cause only a temporary boom. Eventually, one or more of those companies - - probably Xucphra or Zaltin, or maybe even a Hutt front business - - would make a power play.

The Ashern plan was simple. I was to move about to key alazhi fields that were secretly under Ashern control.

At these fields, the Vratix were farming a very special kind of alazhi. The Ashern believed that this new hybrid plant would be so remarkable, such an improvement on the original product, that the Ashern themselves would soon drive Xucphra and Zaltin off the planet - - or at least cut them down to size, leaving the Vratix in true control of their ecology, economy, and government. I tried to learn more about the hybrid - - specifically, if it was a hybrid plant, what was the second source of genetic material? - - but even Thranx rebuffed my questions. She trusted me, she claimed (which shouldn't have gratified me as much as it did), but she could take no chances. Besides, it wasn't information I needed to know.

These secret fields were easier to conceal than you'd think; in fact, the Ashern hid them in plain sight. Some of them stretched for hundreds of kilometers, broken up into subsections that were haphazardly organized at best. My first job was to inspect the fields for real - - hybrids could be especially susceptible to disease - - and aid the entire operation by secretly delivering cargo that made the hybrid process possible. I wasn't allowed to open the cargo, but again, the job didn't call for me to know what I was transporting. And that suited me fine.

We were well over a year into the project when the attack came. Thranx and I had set down outside one of the larger Xucphra fields and set out on foot to the Ashern's hidden field.

The field was empty. That should have been the first indication that something was wrong, but I'd grown too complacent in the previous year. I should have known better. Harvest was only two days away, and the fields should have been crawling with Vratix workers spraying down the plants with a natural preservative that would keep them fresh for transport. At the very least, an Ashern agent should have been there to meet us.

I turned to relay this fact to Thranx when a blaster bolt slammed into her upper back, sending her stumbling into me and knocking me into the soggy alazhi field.

At first, my only concern was oxygen. Thranx's torso had me pinned face first in the muck. I wriggled a bit, but she didn't move. Whoever had shot her was probably looking right at me, waiting for me to show some sign of life. With great physical effort, I forced my mind away from the need for air and focused all my attention on the information entering my brain through the right ear, the only part of my head above the waterline of the bog.

Footsteps. Human footsteps, getting closer. At this point, my lungs were aching for air, and I felt myself starting to blackout. Hoping my unseen enemy was close enough, I pushed off with both arms from the solid bottom of the alazhi field, sending muck and plants flying and Thranx - - whose status I still hadn't ascertained - - tumbling over into the field.

I found myself staring at an image from a historical holodrama. An honest-to-Zim Mandalorian warrior stood there in gleaming silver-and-blue armor, holding a blaster pointed at my forehead. Then he pulled the trigger and everything went black.

Part 4: The Kolcta Generation

Thrive or Die: Memoirs of the Bloodletter

Excerpted from Chapter 10: Medicinal Purposes

I should have died. In fact, to be honest, I'm pretty sure I did die. Mandalorian blasters don't have a stun setting. I'd never seen an actual Mandalorian before that day, but collectors have prized their weapon designs for centuries. I own a pair myself that supposedly once belonged to the

patriarch of the Ordo clan. I've never missed once with those blasters. Too bad I didn't have them with me that day.

I don't know how long I was out - - or dead - - but I know why I'm alive telling you this today: Seeqov Thranx.

I came to in the alazhi field. Judging from the sun's position in the sky, I'd either been out for an hour or a day and an hour (which wouldn't have surprised me, considering the way I felt). Thranx's big, bug-eyed head was hanging low over my face, and she was chittering something in Vratix I didn't quite understand. It may have been a song, now that I think about it. Vratix music usually doesn't use words. She was patting at my forehead with a damp rag she held in one claw. There was no sign of the Mandalorian anywhere.

That I even had a forehead surprised me. I could barely speak, but I managed to ask what had happened.

"We are pleased to see you alive, [REDACTED]," she replied. "For we shall soon be dead."

Vratix are hive-minded creatures, and they never use a first-person singular pronoun in my experience, even when speaking Basic. Therefore, she wasn't saying we were both doomed. Just her.

I raised a hand to my forehead and felt a moist but complete skull still attached to my shoulders. Could the Mandalorian have missed?

"You were mortally injured," Thranx continued. "The blue one shot you in the face."

"I remember," I managed. "What about you? If I survived..."

"You survived because of me," she clicked, "And because of this." She held the rag aloft, and I took a closer look. It was my own tunic, saturated with - -

"Bacta?" I said when the distinctive smell hit my nostrils. "No, wait, it's not quite right. Where did it come from?"

"From us, of course," Thranx said, cocking her head in a way that I knew was her version of a smirk. "Using chemicals from our own torso, and the plants you see around us." She let out a tinny sound that I knew was a Vratix sigh. "We will soon be dead. We must tell you the secret of the Ashern fields. You have a right to know what you've been hired to do, and no one else is authorized to share this secret. But I trust you, Human, even if my superiors do not."

I simply nodded.

"You noted that this does not smell like bacta, and you are correct. It is not bacta. It is kolcta."

"Kolcta? What's that, some kind of super-bacta?" I asked.

"You are wise," Thranx replied. "If simplistic. Do you know what kolto is?"

"A Thyferran sabacc variant?"

"No," she chattered, and I could hear her breathing slits wheezing with effort. "It is a legend in the medical establishment. An ancient medicine that made bacta look no more potent than a strong glass of lum. But it has not grown wild for millennia."

"Where did it come from? What makes it so special?"

"We do not know whence it came, though it was definitely rich in water; the plant can't grow without a lot of it," Thranx said. "This trait is shared by the alazhi, which has allowed us to grow this hybrid kolazhi right under the noses of the cartel. The preserved seeds were acquired by my superiors on the black market, but it was Seeqov that learned how to splice the DNA into the alazhi."

"What's so special about it?" I repeated.

"For one, it can be converted into a potent healing fluid by a dying Vratix and used to heal a mortal blaster wound to a Human forehead," she offered. "The kolazhi is so potent that no refining is necessary."

"You mean you made some right here, on the spot?"

"Yes," Thranx said.

"But if any Vratix anywhere could turn itself into a 'kolcta' factory..."

"The cartels would have no industry to manage. We would - - how do you say, 'cut out the middleman' and finally be independent of the cartels. We would be a free people once again."

Help! This bacta deformed my ribcage!

With effort, I pulled myself to my feet. I placed my hands gently on either side of Thranx's insectoid face and smiled. "Thank you. That's precisely what I needed to know." With a quick flick, I snapped her head clean from her shoulders and tossed it into the soggy kolazhi field before she'd stopped chittering.

The Ashern paid well, and so did the Cartels, but someone else had already paid me even better. Within 48 hours, I had caught a transport to Coruscant. Within a week, a mysterious blight had settled into every one of the kolazhi fields except one. I personally oversaw the harvesting of that field and delivered several tons of the galaxy's only known kolcta to my client within a month. He claimed to suffer from a degenerative aging disease and needed the kolcta to keep himself young. Whatever. I was a rich man.

The Ashern recovered, of course, though I don't think they ever started pursuing the production of kolcta again. My own personal supply will run out soon, and by then I may start to age myself.

Maybe then I'll retire to Thyferra. It was a nice place to work.

Twelve weeks before the Battle Of Geonosis

[Ed. Note—Even as its government structure began to crumble, the Old Republic continued to send ambitious exploratory expeditions to study and catalog little-known worlds, such as Dagobah. We can now see it as an effort made through momentum and established bureaucracy, with no real scientific drive; after all, the Republic had sent out missions like this for centuries, then dutifully cataloged and forgot all the survey reports. We are only now beginning to mine the treasures of information buried deep within the databases on the Imperial capital world of Coruscant.]

The commander of the Dagobah research team, Halka Four-Den, kept an account of the expedition, as she was required to do; but unfortunately all her records were misplaced during the upheaval of the Emperor's New Order. Now, though, after many years, Halka Four-Den's fragmented log entries have been located and are being published here for the first time.]

FIRST WEEK SUMMARY

The planet Dagobah—who named it, and why, is told in no existing record. Dagobah itself seems to avoid mention, as if some invisible power deflects all inquiries. As a result, the swampy planet is cloaked in mystery.

We—my team and I—were chosen to shed light on the enigma of Dagobah. It is an honor to add our discoveries to the greater knowledge of all sentient beings. The task ahead of us seems great, but we are enthusiastic and dedicated.

Dagobah is the only inhabitable world in a system of the same name in the Sluis sector. Shrouded in thick clouds over a dense gray-green blanket of foliage, Dagobah looks grim from space.

Two of my team members expressed uneasiness as we approached and entered orbit, somewhat concerned to be stranded here alone and self-sufficient for our allotted standard year in the field, but I tolerated none of that talk. Perhaps I was too harsh, but I could not allow a drop in morale before we even landed at our objective!

The cargo pods detached first from the main

freighter, burning down through the atmosphere and carrying transporters of supplies and armored self-erecting shelters and laboratory enclosures.

Then the eight of us suited up and took our meager personal possessions. We said our good-byes to the other passengers, who would continue to a distant star system, climbed aboard the robotic dropship, and strapped in. I gave the order to launch, and we fell toward Dagobah, which would be our home for the next standard year.

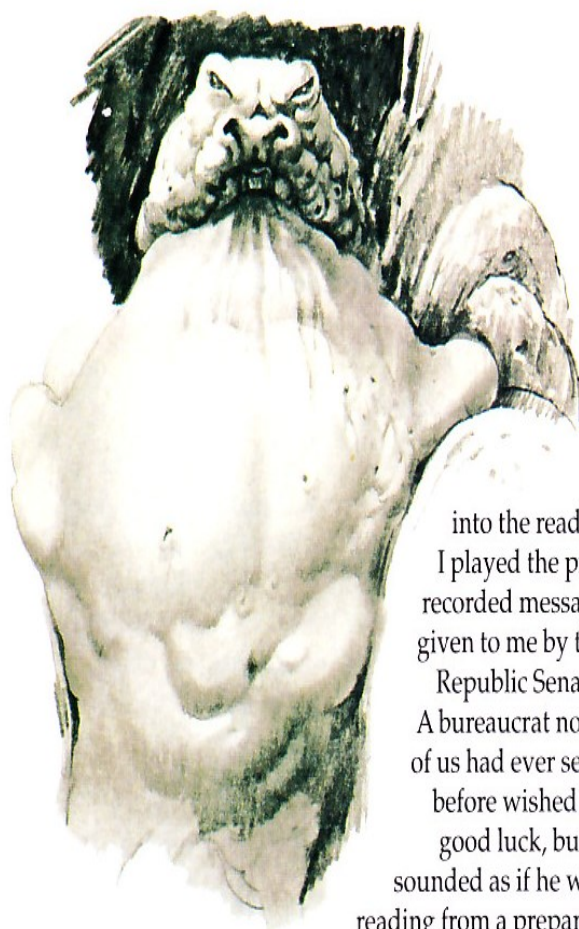
At ground level, the smell of rot permeates the air. The buzzing, chirping, crunching sounds of billions of living things make a constant, pounding hum of white noise.

The swamp looked the same and endless for kilometers. One site seemed as good as any other, so we used heavy laser burners and plasma fusers to clear a camp, where we established our permanent base. Working together, we set up our prefabricated shelters, sealed our supplies in airtight armored containers, and took inventory.

My seven companions comprise a small botanical and zoological research team, dedicated to compiling all possible information about the world. In its ancient days of expansion, the Republic had established a venerable tradition of mapping and cataloging all known planets—but in such a vast galaxy with hundreds of millions of star systems, this was no simple task, and many had slipped through the cracks. Dagobah was one such planet, and we would be the ones to rectify that mistake.

On this swampy, inaccessible world, we were supposed to summarize and comment on the characteristics of the primary indigenous species—plant, animal, insect, and...other. Our survey team was woefully understaffed for the job, eight researchers to catalog and understand a world, using only old and questionable equipment...but it was the best the Republic could spare for us. We were enthusiastic xenobotanists and naturalists, so we attempted the task, regardless.

As commander of the expedition, I gathered the team in the main shelter and slipped the data chip



into the reader. I played the pre-recorded message given to me by the Republic Senate. A bureaucrat none of us had ever seen before wished us good luck, but it sounded as if he was reading from a prepared statement that had been used many times before. I did not point this out to my companions. The message ended, and we set to work.

Initial Impressions: Dagobah is absolutely covered with life, swarming with creatures and plants large and small. Within the tiers of the ecological system can be found every conceivable form of stalking technique, defense mechanism, and camouflage. We learned quickly that if you don't watch where you sit, you may well find the rock or log to be alive and scuttling away under you!



As near as we can tell, all creatures we have seen so far are nonsentient. The planet's ecosystem must have spent its energy on quantity and diversity, filling every possible natural niche, rather than developing intelligence.

Sometimes, though, as I stand alone in the noisy but weirdly silent swamp, I wonder if the world itself resents our presence, wanting to keep the mystery that shrouds it. Perhaps Dagobah is gathering its malevolent forces to resist our work at unraveling its secrets.

I shouldn't be thinking like this.

Eleven weeks before the Battle Of Geonosis

HOLONET NEWS

Volume 351. #45. 13:2:28

HoloNet News is Back and Secure

Following the unfortunate slicer attacks of 2:25, the free edition of HoloNet News is now back online and more secure than ever. Our networks now employ MerenData's latest socketguards and a state-of-the-art Mandalmatrix system security administrator. We will spare no cost in providing you, the readers of the Republic, a fast, accurate and above-all, secure news experience.

We would like to remind readers that only the free-access version of the HoloNet News was affected. The full-subscription edition, available for only 45 credits and filled with up-to-the-minute updates from throughout the regions of the galaxy, was in no way disturbed. Remember, a HoloNet News full subscription makes a great gift!

We have been assured that the Judiciary is investigating the slicing matter. Our recovery applications are busily piecing together our former archives, and we ask for your patience while we recover our previous issues.

- The Editorial Staff of HoloNet News

Ando, Sy Myrth Secede

QUANTILL CITY, ANDO - Less than two standard hours after this morning's secession of Ando and Sy Myrth was made official, jubilant anti-Republic protestors filled the streets of Quantill City's busy Raquish Thoroughfare, celebrating the separation.

This morning's Senate session saw the formal departure of Ando and Sy Myrth from the Republic. The world's representatives, Senators Po Nudo and Toonbuck Toora, respectively, did not appear in Senate, and instead tendered their resignations via droid proxy.

Aqualish from scattered territories and backgrounds converged in the city square, holding placards denouncing the Republic and celebrating their beloved Senator. At least several Republic Senate Guards were burned in effigy.

"Ando will now determine her own future," said a proud First Minister Daragi Hoba via hologram to the Andoan revelers. "It is meant to be, given the rampant hypocrisy of Palpatine's Republic. The current dispute over the creation of a Republic army is just another in a long line of insults to the Aqualish people."

Hoba was referencing the long history of Republic instituted demilitarization of the Andoan people, which often led to bloody conflicts like the Battle of Raquish, and the Horos Spine Incident.

Senator Nudo was not seen on Ando during the celebration, and is likely in-transit, returning from Coruscant.

The secession of Sy Myrth comes as little surprise to Coruscant insiders. Senator Toora had been absent from duty for over a standard month, and Republic transports destined for Sy Myrth have been declined passage for the past 25 days.

Senator Toora has long been a political opponent to Palpatine. A decade ago, she sided with Trade Federation representatives during the Naboo incident, and she has been a vocal critic of the Republic's efforts to regulate Commerce Guild operations in the Outer Rim.

"Since Sy Myrth is largely self-sufficient and quite wealthy, I think the only thing the planet will 'suffer' is being released from the burden of Republic taxation," said Sy Myrthian com-host and political commentator Brookish Boon during his morning broadcast.

The Chancellor's Office was unavailable for comment, though these latest losses will most likely be addressed during tomorrow's Senate session.
Mass Aqualish Exodus Expected

WESTPORT, CORUSCANT -- Freespan Starlanes Transport has announced plans to double the number of scheduled liner departures for Ando, predicting increased travel from Andoan expatriates wishing to return. Other major starlines, including Romodi Interstellar and Galaxy Tours are expected to announce similar increases.

Already, within hours of the secession, over 500 Aqualish have booked passage off Coruscant. Westport, which handles the bulk of Coruscant's emigrant departures, has experienced a 6,000 percent increase in traffic since the separatist crisis began.

"It's clear where home is now," said a harried Unga Torr, an Aqualish formerly employed as a Senate clerk. He and his family are just one of hundreds at the Westport ticketing stations today.

According to official census records, there are an estimated 145 million Aqualish living on Coruscant right now, most in the Taung Heights region of the city. The local Heights economy, much of it run by -- or catering to -- Aqualish, is expected to crumble.

Similar repercussions aren't likely to be as hard-hitting in the Sy Myrthian population, which also declared secession today. There are only an estimated 15 million Sy Myrthians, widely distributed among the various municipalities of Coruscant.

While Westport deals with a mass Aqualish exodus, Eastport continues to take in a non-stop flood of refugees from seceded worlds. "You think this is bad now, wait until those Aqualish who still want to be part of the Republic start spilling in," said an Eastport security officer who did not want to be identified.

Stark Veterans Blast Amidala

PHELAR, ERIADU -- The Stark Veteran Assembly has publicly criticized Naboo Senator Padmé Amidala for statements attributed to her during a Peace Rally on Commenor. SVA Spokesbeing Laslo Dorits called Amidala's statements "disgraceful, stupid and typical," during a live interview on the Eriadu talk show, *Essence*, last night.

"Soldiers are expendable tools for politicians like her, who don't like to muddy or bloody their hands with the defense of the Republic," Dorits told host AndroosinLiann. "Yet it was soldiers who liberated her world a decade ago, and now she's calling us cowards."

The statement Dorits refers to is one Amidala made to a gathering of University of Commenor students during her planet-hopping Campaign against Republic Militarization. "Warfare is the product of cowardice; it takes bravery to forego easy answers and find peaceful resolutions," the Senator said. Amidala, who concludes her series of speeches on Chommel Minor next week, declined comment, but posted the following at the Naboo message exchange on the HoloNet.

"I have a great respect for the men and women tasked to protect their native soil. I too have lived with the specter of war, and will never forget it. What I don't have respect for is needless warmongering of the type being conducted by alarmist elements in the Senate."

Nikto Cultists Plague Sisar Run

DNALVEC, SRILUUR - The Bureau of Ships and Services has announced an advisory for travelers near the Sisar Run area of the Periphery, due to increased acts of violence from the Nikto Cult of M'dweshuu.

The violent "blood cult" of Nikto followers have found their way off their homeworld of Kintan, and are in the midst of a campaign of scattered violence up and down the Sisar Run. The Cult -- believed to be under 100 individuals -- has killed 27 travelers in occult mutilations, the latest last week at Nwarcol Point.

The Nikto cult predates the Republic and has been put down by the ruling Hutts on numerous occasions, each time supposedly being wiped out. The Cult once ruled the planet Kintan, necessitating the brutal Hutt annexation of the planet centuries ago.

Local businesses and planetary governments have issued open bounties on free Nikto in the Periphery. Many of these bounties offer rewards of 1,000-5,000 credits "dead or alive." As such, free Nikto (those not in the employ of Hutts or Hutt enterprises) are strongly advised from travel in the Periphery. Dorosii the Hutt, Appointed Intermediate to the Senate, has assured Republic officials that they can resolve the cult violence without government intervention. Nonetheless, the Jedi Council is reportedly examining the situation and is likely to dispatch a taskforce.

Datanet Propaganda the Real Deal?

IBC ARCOLOGY, CORUSCANT -- The most skilled slicers from MerenData are still puzzled how an IBC data-server was compromised for the spreading of separatist propaganda last week, even after having examined and purged the system.

IBC clients using the bank clan's datacom-net would have received messages urging secession and Senate reform, with what looked to be a signature from Count Dooku. The Senate Bureau of Intelligence is dismissing the propaganda missives as hoaxes, but MerenData officials don't readily concur.

"Ordinarily, we'd attribute this kind of vandalism to independent slicers looking to make a name for themselves," said MerenData's Security Administrator Gray Tucker. "But to cut into the banking clan's network suggests that these people had impressive backing."

IBC officials continue to tell investors that their systems are secure, and point to the fact that only their message-exchange systems were compromised, and

not their more tightly guarded transaction channels. "The safety of our clients investment is always our paramount concern," says IBC Chairman San Hill in a message that accompanies all account statements dispatched to investors this month.

RM&S Debates Calendar Reform

MENNA, *MRLSST* - The Republic Measures & Standards Bureau is debating the issue of calendar reform, prompted by an independent report citing "an impending bureaucratic crisis of disparate timekeeping" in official records. According to the report, there are over 20 different dating schemes in use in various government offices throughout the Republic, all of them "official" in some capacity. "The use of multiple timekeeping schemes was originally to accommodate different cultural backgrounds," said RM&S Chair Keelen Ma, "but now it's just a tangled mess of confusion. We've got the Judiciary using the 10-month standard calendar, archivists using the Alderaanian 11-month notation, and infrastructure using a hexadecimal-based system. Researchers are getting tired of needing calendar converters in their pads." The current debate stems over which zero-point year-notation system is the best, with the Great ReSynchronization of 13 years ago and the Ruusan Reformation of a millennium ago being popular contenders.

Rep. Binks Destroys Ice Statue at Gala Fundraiser

JRADE PLAZA, *CORUSCANT* -- He did it again; Representative Jar Jar Binks (Naboo) accidentally destroyed an elaborate ice statue at a gala fundraiser in Coruscant's posh Jade-district last night. The notoriously maladroit Binks apparently had tucked the tablecloth upon which rested the statue into his cummerbund, and he pulled down the intricately-crafted Kime Enanrum-original when he attempted to catch tumbling canapés he had knocked from a passing waiter. This incident echoes a similar one two months ago, when Binks accidentally deactivated the sky dome at the opening of the Endangered Shreebird Aviary. "I knew he was invited to attend," said a crestfallen Enanrum, "I don't know what I was thinking even bringing it here."

Virgillian Jedi Envoy Declared Lost

VIRGILLIAN NODE - The Jedi diplomatic envoy dispatched to broker peace talks in the Virgillian Civil War has been declared lost after having been missing for three standard weeks. Four Jedi -- Masters Ludwin Katarkus and Everen Ettene plus their Padawans Danyawarra and Halagad Ventor -- left Coruscant last month to try to settle the two-year old conflict between the Virgillian Free Alignment and the Aristocracy. Upon arrival, their transport was attacked and destroyed. The Jedi Temple will be holding services for the fallen protectors tomorrow.

SECOND WEEK SUMMARY

Our two entomologists began to collect specimens. As part of the plan established in our expedition protocol, we all assisted them in rigging up bright lights around the clearing of our settlement, along with nets connected to very weak stunner fields. In the dim underworld of the Dagobah swamps, we assumed that the bright lights would attract various nocturnal insects, but we weren't prepared for the magnitude of the response.

The brilliant lamps stabbed through the thick mist, burning like a target. The entomologists sat waiting, electronic logpads in hand, ready to record what they saw; the rest of us joined them, prepared to offer our assistance.

After only a few moments, the spotlights brought swarms of creatures from every direction, whining and buzzing, smothering the lamps, dropping dead in their frenzy to batter themselves against the glow. The stunner nets clogged in moments. The entomologists could barely restrain their delight.

More insects came, and more, followed by leathery flying things that feasted on the swarms. The noises of the swamp grew deafening, an incredible crescendo. Then the disoriented creatures began to swoop down and attack us. My team members and I frantically tried to keep ourselves safe under the protective cover of the nets.

Out among the wall of shadowy trees, we heard larger predators stomping through the undergrowth, attracted by the light and sound, coming closer. In the shadows they roared and snarled hungrily.

Before everyone could panic and run inside our flimsy shelters, I ordered the lights switched off. We ran inside our dwellings, barricaded the doors, and pressed our faces against the armored ports, staring out into the tepid darkness, but by the time our eyes had adjusted to the sudden shadows, the swamp creatures had forgotten about the disturbance, and we saw nothing unusual for the rest of that long, sleepless night.

The following morning, I insisted that the spotlights be dismantled and stowed away. We never used them again. The murky fog, frequent torrential downpours, boggy ground, and dense undergrowth make lengthy expeditions from our modular base extremely difficult. Though four members of the team wanted to range far from our site, I advised them to cut back their expectations for the time being, until we had learned some of the basic information about Dagobah. Grudgingly, it seemed, they fell to the simple chore of cataloging and imaging as many of the various specimens as possible.

With only eight people to dissect the life-forms on an entire planet, I sent a tight-beam transmission back to Coruscant, beseeching the Republic for assistance, but my requests either were ignored or were given low priority. It is a shame, because with all the plants and fungi, insects and venomous creatures, a further investment in Dagobah would repay itself a hundredfold with unimaginable advances in medical science, pharmacology, and genetics. But receiving nothing but static in response to our pleas, we dutifully returned to work.

In only two weeks we have already filled our archives with massive amounts of data on thousands of strange organisms.

Ten weeks before the Battle Of Geonosis

HOLONET NEWS

Volume 351. #46. 13:3:07

Palpatine Sets Army Vote Date

Calls on Republic's Citizens to guide Republic through "storm."

SENATE ROTUNDA, CORUSCANT -- Supreme Chancellor Palpatine took to the general channels of the HoloNet yesterday to announce the hotly debated Military Creation Act will finally be settled next month. Palpatine announced the date of 5:16 for the full Senate vote on the creation of an Army of the Republic.

"Above all things, this is a democratic union, and we will turn to the will of the people to decide this most contentious issue. Even when times are turbulent, we will always look to the Republic's citizens, through their elected representatives, to guide this grand vessel through any storm," said Palpatine. Though reaction is strong on both sides of the Army debate, there is at least some consensus: a sense of relief that two years worth of bureaucratic stalemating is finally being resolved.

"I applaud the Supreme Chancellor for taking the initiative to end this pointless debate," said Senator Aks Moe (Malastare). "We've wasted enough time while our enemies conspire against us. By year's end, I predict a strong, proud unified army working side by side with the Jedi order to protect our worlds." Vocal opponent Senators caution that the vote could serve to provoke increased hostilities with Separatists forces. "Make no mistake, [a yes vote] will galvanize the Separatists, and be seen by them as an invitation to war," said Senator Tendau Bendon (Ithor). "Every Senator must think heavily upon the consequences of next month's decision. We are not just voting on the creation of a defense force, but rather our votes will determine the start of open hostilities."

Others, like Senator Garm Bel Iblis (Corellia), were more pragmatic about the issue. "Where is this army going to come from? Who will get stuck with the bill for its creation? The Republic taxpayer. We should stay with Planetary Security Forces that have worked for centuries. The Corellian people are not going to pay for both CorSec and this Republic Army."

The Supreme Chancellor avoided partisan arguments, though his past statements have indicated he is against the Military Creation Act. "My ultimate goal is a peaceful resolution to this conflict, above all," said Palpatine at the end of his announcement. "But if such a resolution requires the creation of a military, as decreed by the Senate, then I will abide by the will of the Republic, a Republic that has stood strong for a thousand generations, that has enjoyed peace for a thousand years."

The two-month interim before the vote will allow for distant Senators to return to Coruscant, while gauging public opinion within their constituencies. Individual sector and planetary referendums are expected to be common in the coming weeks.

The exact phrasing of the vote was not revealed by Palpatine, but is likely to be a simple yes/no proposition on creating an Army of the Republic. After that, it is likely a commission will be set up with appointed Senators to determine military resource allocation.

"How long will those decisions take? It's taken two years just to table the vote. By the time we determine which sector and planetary forces will contribute to the military, there may not be any systems left in the Republic," said Senator Tikkes (Mon Calamari). "If Palpatine thinks this issue will go away with this vote, he's more naïve than I thought."

Baktoid Closes Down Five More Plants

TERMIN, METALORN -- In a statement issued to shareholders, Baktoid Armor Workshop confirmed that they will close down five more plants in the Inner Rim and Colonies as a direct result of Republic regulations that have hindered their battle droid program.

Baktoid plants on Foundry, Ord Cestus, Telti, Balmorra and Ord Lithone will close by month's end. An estimated 12.5 million employees will be laid off as a result.

Legislation passed by the Senate eight years ago forced the disbanding of the Trade Federation's security forces, the largest single consumer of Baktoid's combat automata and vehicles. Further licensing restrictions on the sale of battle droids made the purchase of such hardware prohibitively expensive for most of Baktoid's clientele.

The statement, a Basic text-only communiqué attributed to Techo Union foreman and Baktoid executive Wat Tambor, made no indication as to future Baktoid plans to counter these losses.

"According to last year's annual statement, Baktoid is still pulling in the same rawmat figures, yet hasn't diversified its product," says business analyst Deregue Hiatt. "We have a company that's spending, buying resources, but isn't making or selling goods. You can bet shareholders aren't happy."

At the start of the year, Baktoid officials explained the increased purchases of rawmats as investment in future diversification, something that has yet to be reflected in the company's product catalog. The late Senator Lanus Wrede (Sermeria) made headlines when he suggested that Baktoid was using said materials in secret Outer Rim plants, free from Republic regulations.

Such claims were refuted by business analysts, as well as a three-month investigation. The scandal amounted to an unrecoverable political blunder on Wrede's part, which led to his suicide earlier in the year.

"Doing something like [Wrede described] isn't good business either," adds Hiatt. "There are no markets out there in the Outer Rim, and the added cost of transporting finished product back to the Republic markets would be unreasonably prohibitive. None of Baktoid's wares have shown up in the black market in figures that would suggest that Wrede was onto something."

15 Dead in Houk / Weequay Brawl at Eastport

EASTPORT, CORUSCANT -- A three-hour melee between Houk and Weequay immigrants at an Eastport processing station has left 15 dead and 45 wounded.

The fracas began at 0810 this morning when tensions between the Houks and Weequays, who have long been cultural enemies, were compounded by being placed in adjacent holding rooms while waiting to be processed. According to witnesses, the conflict began verbally, before turning into bloodshed.

"Each group was complaining loudly about having to be put next to the other one," said Rievale Creterk, a flight attendant who was witness to the melee. "Suddenly there was a lot of shouting and it started off as a brawl between two of them. Everyone started jumping in, and it all went to hell."

Though no shots were fired by the combatants, since blasters are prohibited within the processing concourse, several were armed with makeshift shivs and concealed blades. Many innocent passersby were injured as the brawl spread from the processing station to the nearby food court. Also, several civilians attempted to calm the enraged combatants, only provoking attacks upon themselves.

Eastport Security first attempted to clear the public concourses before opening fire, but the fight had attracted many spectators. When it was decreed safe to do so, security personnel fired stun blasts, though the massive Houks were at first unaffected by the shots.

"Since Weequays started dropping from the hits first, the Houks just took it to mean they were winning, and they started fighting even harder," described Creterk. Security then concentrated fire on the Houks, stunning them into unconsciousness. They were finally able to clear the remaining combatants three hours after the violence started.

"It was terrible, there was so much blood and damage. Bodies were everywhere. I kept looking, hoping to see a Jedi, but there's never one around when you need one these days," said Creterk, who suffered a broken arm in the scuffle.

Jedi Refuse to Hand Over Baby Ludi

JEDI TEMPLE, CORUSCANT -- Three weeks after a formal petition, the Jedi Council refused to hand over Baby Ludi to her mother, Jonava Billane. Breaking the Jedi Council's usual silence on the issue, a representative issued an explanation of the Jedi Code that forbids the return of the child to its birth-parent.

"We have opened the child's mind to the larger world of the Force," explained Jedi Master Coleman Trebor. "The child is awakened, and to return it to the birth-parents at this stage would be far too dangerous. It is in everyone's best interests and safety for the child to remain in Jedi custody."

A visibly distraught Billane continued her determined campaign that saw her spend what meager funds she had to travel from Ord Thoden to Coruscant. "What about my own code?" she said to reporters on the steps of the Jedi Temple. "I believe that a child should be with her mother, and won't stop until I have Ludi back in my arms."

The custody drama began six months ago, when the child was discovered in the ruins of the Ord Thoden capital of Domitree, after a quake devastated the city. Jedi rescue workers found the child to have Force potential and took the baby girl into custody, naming her Aris-Del Wari.

Standard Jedi procedure would have required parental consent prior to adopting the child into the Jedi order, but the parents were missing and presumed dead. A month later, a convalescing Jonava Billane was found in an outskirt town, and her concerted search for her baby, which she named Ludi, has since led her to Coruscant.

With no established procedure to deal with this situation, Republic Judiciary officials are scrambling to find a resolution. Already Billane's pleas have attracted a popular following, and her formal petition to the Jedi Council, delivered by her sector's representative, Senator Boganni Hrul, made headlines throughout the galaxy.

The People's Inquest, a grassroots Jedi watch-group, has helped Billane on her pursuit. "This is just further evidence that the Jedi order needs to be held accountable to the people who subsidize its operations," said Inquest leader Thrynka Padaunete.

Opinions from the Street

"Given that the parent never gave her consent, I don't know what the issue it is, The Jedi say it's dangerous, but how can a six-month old child be dangerous?"

Lomina Argo
Systems Analyst

"I think this has passed beyond a simple custody dispute, and those involved are just using it to push their own agendas, using that poor woman as a political tool."

Hraashi Lool
University Student

"Well, peoples gotta understand that them Jedis gots their rules to live by. It's their rules that have made the galaxy safe. Well, until now, anyways."

Slyther Bushforb
Private Investigator

"Why is this still making news? The [expletive deleted] Republic is tearing itself apart, and we're talking about a snot-nosed brat and his whining mother."

Wuuden Malnic

Courier

Incom / Subpro Development Deal Cancelled

COROMON ISLAND, FRESIA -- After 125 years of partnership, Incom and Subpro are calling it quits. Representatives from both companies have called it an amicable split, though analysts point to the faltering Subpro sales as the underlying reason. "Subpro losses were dragging down Incom's perceived value, so they're doing some much needed housecleaning," says business analyst Deregue Hiatt. Their last co-venture, the Incom/Subpro Z-95AF4 met a lukewarm reception, and marked the end of the venerable Headhunter line. Incom reportedly purchased the intellectual property rights and proprietary systems of the Z-95 prior to the dissolution of the partnership.

Dooku Bounty Posting Still A Mystery

NEW VERTICA, NAR SHADDAA -- Authorities are still attempting to discover the source of an unregistered and therefore illegal bounty posting on Count Dooku of Serenno found on a Nar Shaddaa datanet. The posting, offering 1 million Republic credits standard for the delivery of Dooku's remains, was discovered two weeks ago on the public datanet. The posting was not listed in the Republic Enforcement DataCore or the Bounty Hunters Guild. The contact information leads to a dummy message account from which no leads were discovered. The Republic has roundly rejected involvement in the posting of the bounty on the secessionist movement's loudest advocate. "This current crisis will be resolved through procedure and negotiation, not illegal vigilantism," stressed Mas Amedda, Vice Chair of the Senate.

Army Vote Prompts Chandrilan Public Safety Walk-out

HANNA CITY, CHANDRILA -- Following the announcement of the Army Vote over general HoloNet channels, the 575 employees of Chandrila's Public Safety Commission, responsible for medical and emergency crisis response in Hanna City, walked off the job for 48 standard hours. "We have our duties, and will return to them," assured protesting worker Ocandra Leeds. "But we wanted to demonstrate our objection to this turn of events in a way that would be remembered. Handing over homeland security to the Republic will result in depersonalized services here at home, as tax revenues earmarked for local forces are instead funneled to support the Army of the Republic."

Prior to the walk-out, Public Safety employees did take care to program droid assistants to handle the increased workload, something that will be weighed by Chandrila's government when judging the protestor's actions. "Chandrila has always encouraged and fostered free, responsible speech, and it would appear that these workers took every measure to ensure their absence would not endanger anyone," said Govenor Tanis Mothma.

Sullustans Elect President

SOROSUUB CENTROPLEX, SULLUST -- Beolars Bribbs became the new President of the Sullustan Council and CEO of SoroSuub Corporation as Sullustan citizens and SoroSuub shareholders exercised their democratic rights yesterday. Bribbs' becoming the head of the Sullustan Council now means the entire ruling body is composed of SoroSuub executives. The mineral-processing company and manufacturer of diverse consumer products employs half of the planet's population.

A constitutional amendment enacted ten years ago saw voting privileges extended to all SoroSuub shareholders, and not just citizens of Sullust. Since then, the Sullustan Council has gradually become an extension of the corporation. "In a time of uncertainty, Sullust has prospered by adhering to the values that have made it a continuing success in a crowded market," said Bribbs in his inaugural speech. "Hard work, persistence, and the cherishing of family is the Sullustan brand identity."

Representatives from the Commerce Guild, of which

SoroSuub is a key signatory, attended the inauguration as esteemed guests. Shu Mai, head of the Guild, supported Bribbs statements' to resounding applause. "Sullust shines as a nova of capitalism. Its robust economy supports a healthy, happy and profitable population. This world exemplifies the wondrous possibilities and merits of corporate growth." Among Bribbs' first duties in office will be the tabling of a new amendment that will see shareholder votes equaling twice the value of non-shareholder votes in future elections.

Riots Rock Kabal

SHORIBUS, KABAL -- After two months of going without food shipments, the citizenry of Kabal's capital city of Shoribus broke into deadly riots. The Kabal central government attempted to ease the disgruntled populace by issuing free vouchers good for actual foodstuffs upon arrival, but that gesture only sparked further aggression. The Kabal Central Citadel was damaged by protestors, with a small portion of its northern wing set ablaze. Kabal authorities are attempting to bring the protestors under control. There are no official reports as to casualties or damage estimates. Kabal was previously serviced by Trade Federation freighters, but increased Republic taxation on the Sharlissian Trade Corridor made the route cost-prohibitive. Unlicensed independent traders have taken up the cargo runs, but they have not been able to keep up with demand.

Pergitor Coup Leaves Thousands Dead

MINOS CLUSTER NODE -- The exiled leaders of the Church of Infinite Perception have reclaimed rule of the planet Pergitor in a bloody coup, ending what they call years of "liberal decadence." The planet had been under strict authoritarian rule for years until a popular revolution of young liberals claimed the world fifteen years ago. Public backlash against the disorganized rule of the younger generation allowed the Church of Infinite Perception, a rigid fundamentalist sect, to gain momentum. Reports indicate that thousands were killed in the coup, and that the former ruling family is now in exile. Given the remoteness of the Minos Cluster, Pergitor's nebulous affiliation to the Republic and the fact that the

Church has a strict rule condemning the display of paranormal activity, it is unknown how the Jedi will resolve this issue.

Merson Pirates Attack Sy Myrth Liner

STENNESS DATA NODE -- Long-range sensor data compiled by a BoSS network subspace relay has confirmed that the *Elegant Wake*, a Sy Myrthian passenger liner, was scuttled by Merson pirates.

The transport left Coruscant four days ago, carrying Sy Myrthian refugees returning to their recently seceded planet. Its travel route skirted the Merson asteroid belt, necessitating a reversion to realspace.

A Merson raider group comprising at least five fast-attack vessels emerged from the field and attacked the unarmed liner. The liner carried 456 registered passengers, all Sy Myrthian. The Mersons, who have known ties to the Zygerrian slavers, may have taken the captives alive. The data after the disabling of the craft is distorted by stellar flare activity, making it impossible to determine exactly what became of the ship and its passengers.

Relatives of the victims have been threatening a class action suit against Romodi Interstellar, the operator of the liner, for negligence. They claim that the standard silent running procedure for passing through the asteroid field was botched by crew incompetence, and that the BoSS data will back their claims.

"That the liner registered on anyone's long range sensors proves that the ship wasn't following procedure. Now that we've actually got data readings of it proves this," says Roonyard Noon, a Sy Myrthian lawyer whose wife and three children were aboard the *Wake*.

Slowing down their pursuit of compensatory damages are increased bureaucratic hurdles now that Sy Myrth is no longer a Republic world and thus its access to the Courts requires special handling.

THIRD WEEK SUMMARY

A great botanical discovery this week, as we began to explore beyond the fringes of our camp. Our researchers went out in two groups of three, fully armed, with the remaining two people left behind and prepped as a rescue squad, should emergency measures be needed.

The most prominent living things in the swamp are the ancient petrified forests of “gnarltrees,” huge roots rising out of the bog, buttressed in the muck, gathering into wide trunks. The knobby roots and outer layers of the trunk have been calcified through centuries and centuries of slowly growing and rising toward the forest canopy high above. Because of their obvious importance to the Dagobah ecosystem, these trees were our first focus of investigation.

Each gnarltree itself is a microcosm of life-forms, with lichens, moss, and shelf fungus filling the cranies in the calcified trunk. These parasitic growths draw nutrients by breaking down outer layers of the gnarltree and absorbing moisture from the mists in the air. Insectlike organisms build nests in the knotholes and tangles of the webbed branches, while larger animals take shelter in the cave-sized hollows beneath the overhanging loops.

One common creature, the knobby white spider, is intimately connected with the ecology of the gnarl-trees. Understanding the life cycle of the fearsome-looking albino spider proved quite a challenge to us, and upon learning its secret we realized how alien this world was, how evolution had taken a bizarre and unexpected path here.

All the specimens of knobby spiders we obtained were about the same size, as big as a landspeeder, each with a lumpy, large body and gnarled legs that seemed designed for camouflage among the towering roots. Though the white spiders are

common, nearly to the point of being pests, our field teams found no nests or eggs or young that would give a clue as to the spiders’ development.

Finally, by dissecting one of the knobby spiders, our arachnid specialist discovered that the creature’s body core was made primarily of calcified wood, the same as the trees. The knobby spiders *are* part of the gnarltrees’ life cycle!

I cannot describe to you our arguments and discussions, the skepticism we held, during our evening summary reports inside the main camp dwelling under the comforting glow of artificial light, surrounded by the wildness.

As we gathered more and more data, the evidence became incontrovertible; even the most vehement skeptics accepted the theory: In much the same way as some familiar plants send out runners to reproduce and spread, the gnarltrees grow a special kind of detachable, *mobile* root—the knobby spider—that breaks free of its parent gnarltree and begins the predator phase of its life.

The knobby spider roams the swamps, hunting and devouring other animals, storing energy in its bloated, bulbous head. When it has gathered enough nutrients to support itself during its metamorphosis phase, the knobby spider searches for a clear spot in the undergrowth, where it will remain for centuries.

In preparation for its anchored phase, the spider uproots all competing plant life within about ten meters—sometimes even including other implanted knobby spiders—and then plunges its eight sharp legs deep into the spongy ground. As the spider drains its stored energy, the gangly legs transform into roots, tapping deeper into the soil. The bloated head shrinks and hardens, and then begins extending upward into a rudimentary trunk, eventually reaching the canopy above.

We know this hypothesis will be challenged by other members of the scientific community, so we have redoubled our efforts to image this transformation in progress and to place a wealth of specimens in our stasis boxes for transport when our assignment here is finished.

Some members of our team have already begun counting down the days.

Nine weeks before the Battle Of Geonosis

HOLONET NEWS

Volume 351. #47. 13:3:14

Corellia Closes Borders

Bel Iblis Leaves Senate in Uproar

Corellians Insist it is not Secession - Invoke Obscure Constitutional Provison

SENATE ROTUNDA, CORUSCANT - The Senate chambers filled with loud outcries of protest and dismay yesterday morning following Senator Garm Bel Iblis' surprise announcement that Corellia would close its borders and pull out of the Military Creation Act vote.

"The Corellian sector, one of the founding fathers of the Republic, is not seceding," stressed Bel Iblis. "However, Corellia will not participate in what it deems a profound error that threatens its sovereignty."

After the announcement, Bel Iblis and his retinue left the Senate Hall under heavily armed CorSec escort who pushed aside journalists and critical Senators. Bel Iblis refused comment. The Senator left Coruscant, reportedly for Corellia. As Bel Iblis said, no Articles of Secession were tendered. As the official record stands, the Corellian delegation enacted an obscure proviso called *Contemplanys Hermi*, an ollys Corellisi phrase meaning "meditative solitude."

It is an ancient Constitutional clause afforded Corellia, recognizing its distinct society and contributions to the founding of the Republic. In exchange for giving up veto power, Corellia and its constituencies can unilaterally withdraw from Senate duties for the duration of the contention. The clause has not been enacted in over 450 years, since Corellia's ill-fated attempt at independence.

The decision comes after a week of closed-door meetings between Bel Iblis and Corellian Diktat Shyla Merricope. When

the Military Creation Act vote was announced, Corellia was one of its most outspoken critics, both in the Senate and the planetary government offices in Corellia's capital city of Coronet.

"CorSec's men and women will not be drafted into Republic service, to die on a distant world outside of Corellia's borders. Nor will armed forces from other worlds be billeted in our homes." Merricope said in caucus, the day following the vote announcement. She later told the sector's leading newsnet, Corellia Sector Newsfeed, that she would do "whatever possible to preserve the integrity of Corellia for Corellians."

Palpatine, who did not attend the eventful Senate session but was instead on Aargau at a finance conference, was brief in his statements to reporters. "I am disheartened to hear that one of our closest brothers lacks such faith in democracy."

Others weren't as measured with their statements. "This is an outrageous display of self-serving hypocrisy," said Senator Orn Free Taa (Ryloth). "Two years ago, Bel Iblis stood before the Senate, arguing about the legality of secession, and now he goes and pulls a stunt like this? It's a grievous blow to unity. My worlds, in the distant Outer Rim have stood by Coruscant through the most tumultuous of heat storms. That one so integral to the Core should lack a spine is shameful." Senator Ister Paddie (Sermeria) was also critical of Corellia's move. "The selfishness is what astounds me. The Corellian sector is largely self-sufficient, wealthy, and with its own defense force. My sector hasn't even a third of these riches, yet we are committed to support the Republic in the most trying of times."

What This Means:

Native and naturalized citizens are allowed free transit to and from the Corellian sector; all others are denied access without special provision from CorSec.

Interstellar trade vessels must deposit cargoes on Outlier

worlds, where they will be brought to inner world destinations via Corellian Merchant Guild transports.

All off-duty and reserve CorSec personnel are now activated. Non-Corellian businesses based in the sector are allowed to continue operating, as long as they abide by the travel and shipping restrictions imposed; typically, this requires the business to purchase membership in the CMG.

Senate Approves Transit Tax

Critics Protest "Refugee Exploitation"

SENATE ROTUNDA, CORUSCANT - By a narrow margin, the Senate has approved a surtax on passengers traveling via registered starliner, effective immediately. Those looking to travel can now add a 15 percent levy on all ticket prices. Opponent Senators were vocal in their criticism towards this new source of revenue. "This is no better than predators picking off the weakest of the herd, or scavenging the remains," said Senator Bail Organa (Alderaan). "So much of the traveling is now undertaken by refugees leaving the Republic or seceded worlds, people who have abandoned homes, families and careers. Do we need to burden them even further?"

Some independent traders and starship operators look forward to prospering from the new tax, as those heading in the right direction can offer transit at rates undercutting the passenger liners. "We may not offer much in terms of amenities," says free trader Eridan Lanclo, "but at the rate that they're packing them into the liners, neither can they. And I know better than to get my aft shot up by pirates." The passenger liner business is hesitant about the new tax, as expressed by Galaxy Tours Vice President Bronwynn Koft. "The reports of starport crowds has everyone thinking that we're making phenomenal money here, but keep in mind that many of those poor souls scraped together all they had in order to make a flight. This 15 percent may be the deciding factor in whether or not they travel, and that will affect our bottom line. We may have to have seat sales to see that we break even."

New Jedi Starfighter Unveiled

KUAT NODE - In a closed testing range at the Kuat Drive Yards, Jedi and Republic officials were on hand to inspect the performance of the newly modified Delta-7 *Aethersprite* light interceptor, the latest instrument of peace in the Jedi arsenal.

Project Engineer Lead Walex Blissex, Kuati Senator Risi Lenoan, and Jedi representatives Adi Gallia and Aayla Secura lauded the small interceptor's performance under controlled conditions.

"Kuat Drive Yards has a proud heritage of serving the Republic, and the new Delta-7s we have specifically prepared for the Jedi order will continue that tradition," said Senator Lenoan. Performing an ancient Kuati nautical tradition, Senator Lenoan used a gilded blade to cut a symbolic tether attached to the prototype's landing gear. In a similar show of protocol, Gallia and Secura extended lit lightsabers in salute to the Kuati dignitaries.

"She is a remarkable vessel," said Blissex. "With the engineering breakthroughs we tackled developing her, she's just the start. She's a real sign of things to come."

At eight meters in length, with a cross-span of under four meters, the Delta-7 would ordinarily be too small to support hyperspace travel. The Jedi starfighter now features a built-in astromech to provide damage control, power regulation, and nav-computer capability. The standard upgrade includes docking clamps and data-feeds to a separate hyperdrive booster ring, subcontracted to TransGalMeg Industries, Inc. of the Rayter sector.

A Delta-7 advanced model, whose specifications remain classified, has been confirmed to carry an onboard hyperdrive and does not require the booster ring. It is unknown what percentage of the Jedi starfighter fleet will consist of Delta-7 advanced.

Following the successful test, the starfighter is now operational, and shipments of the craft are being delivered to the Jedi Temple at Coruscant, and the Jedi Training Center on Kamparas.

Specifications

Kuat Systems Engineering Delta-7 *Aethersprite*

Dimensions: 8 meters x 3.92 meters x 1.44 meters

Maximum Atmospheric Speed: 12,000 kph

Maximum Linear Acceleration: 5,000 G

Cargo Capacity: 60 kg or 0.03 m³

Crew: 1 pilot; 1 astromech

Armament: 2 dual laser cannons (standard)

Currency Upheavals Deliver Profits to IBC

MUNN CITY, MUUNILINST - The InterGalactic Banking Clan's timely leadership in currency exchange technology and infrastructure is among the factors contributing to the organization's 18th straight quarter of increasing profits.

"For our customers choosing to strike out on their own, continuing to trade in Republic credits is not in line with their independent spirit," said Lo Vapeet, the IBC's Vice-Chair of Communication, in a written statement. "It used to take two years and 14 filings to register a new currency. We're pleased to have reduced the process to under 30 minutes, with a basic threshold and exclusivity agreement."

Such easy access to currency may be perilous, says economist Argee Beck. "These systems leave the Republic and are out on their own in the galaxy for the first time. They get seduced by an introductory one-to-one exchange rate and the chance to put their own names on money."

"They forget the economic basics that a credit is only worth what someone else will give you for it," Beck continues.

"Look at the Toong'L system. After only eight months, one Republic Credit will buy you 15 million King Kikipi credits. The Kikipi reserve is actually just a room full of Wocket Festival

ornaments."

With new currencies being registered at a rate of 20 per day, businesses have been quick to license the IBC's InterGalactic Currency Exchange System that makes complicated conversions transparent for a modest transaction fee.

"The InterGalactic Banking Clan doesn't care if these credits go up or down. If enough systems leave the Republic, they'll be getting a percentage of every transaction in the galaxy," warns Beck.

"The registrants for the next 500 approved currencies will receive a deluxe six-slot therma-slice, compliments of the InterGalactic Banking Clan," replied Vapeet.

Point / Counterpoint: Military Creation Act

A Protected Republic is Long Overdue

By Republic Judicial Terrinald Screed

The basic reality we must all face is simple: the Jedi cannot be everywhere. I say this with all due respect to the august order that has staved off warfare for a millennium. But the rules have change. Warfare has moved beyond the scope of a small number of protectors armed with energy blades. Warships can deliver explosive payloads from beyond the horizon, payloads not even the most skilled Jedi could hope to deflect. The Republic's climate and lenient laws have fomented private armies of prodigious size. Droid armies are now cheaper, quicker and easier to maintain than Sector Forces. Furthermore, Sector Forces can now be turned against us, with more and more seceding from the Republic. If the Separatists consolidate their military might, then what would we have to protect us? It takes an army to fight an army. When serene Naboo fell to a rogue Trade Federation venture a decade ago, how was the otherwise defenseless planet able to repulse the invasion? By turning to the amassed army of the indigents. Even such a primitive culture recognized the need to maintain a standing military in the times of peace.

To the peacemakers, I extend my respect. I do not want my child to grow up knowing war. But I do want my child to know the Republic, and I fear that our current course will not allow for it. We cannot rely on our enemies to be enlightened as we are. If warfare is inevitable, it is the Separatists who will fire the first shot. Should we not have the means to deflect that fire?

Relying on Planetary Security or Sector Forces is a stop-gap solution, as the inefficiencies of the Stark Hyperspace War so painfully demonstrated. The solution is obvious -- a unified military coordinated from Coruscant. Our ancient history has proven this has time and again -- the Great Sith War, the Kanz Disorders, the Virujansi Uprising -- times when a unified Republic Navy and Army were strong. And now, as then, there is still a role for the Jedi in today's galaxy: leading an army to victory.

We Are Inviting This War

By Caamasi Senator Eeshrin Ot'Hyne

We, the Republic, stand at a crossroads, and the lessons of the past risk being forgotten to appease anxious constituents. The Senators are gathering the opinions of their sectors and worlds, to find that reason and forethought have been replaced with fear.

The panacea for that fear, the militarists would have you believe, is an army. But that promise is hollow. Violence begets violence, and equipping ourselves for violence will lead to an inevitable and bloody course.

Throughout the galaxy examples of this cycle are plainly evident. Arms races have destroyed nations and sundered planets. Do we need entire sectors -- entire regions -- *the entire Republic* -- set ablaze before we recognize the danger? There has not been a full-scale war in the Republic for a thousand years, as our instruments of diplomacy and defense have sufficed until now. Their effectiveness have faltered not

because they are flawed in premise, but rather in implementation.

What Finis Valorum said on the eve of the Stark Hyperspace War holds true to this day. "We must address the underlying causes that would lead us to war -- and then there would be no war." He never had the chance as the militarists tainted the proceedings, resulting in death and injury. Let us not repeat that mistake.

The militarists are inviting this war for their own ends. Public funds better spent on the Diplomatic Corps or the Refugee Relief Movement will be redirected to their pockets. They will no doubt need to be bolstered with corporate subsidies. The Republic will be indebted to the engines of commerce for its protection.

And a generation or more will forever be scarred by war.

Squibs Announce They're "Going Nowhere."

METROBIG CITY, SKOR II - In a planetwide statement to the Squib citizenry of Skor II, the ruling monarch emphatically proclaimed that the Squibs, as a people, are "going nowhere." Presumably referring to the current secessionist crisis, King Ebareebaveebeedee emphasized his loyalty to the Senate, and that Squib allegiance to the Republic could not be swayed. "Our ultrastrong loyalties and royalties to Republicness and whatever it may stand for will not let splitty-types coax-haggle Squibbish into leaving, no matter the size of the haggleprize," said the King in his 20-minute address. After bargaining for another six minutes of screen-time, the King then added, "You bet." This marks the third Grand Proclamation by the ruler of the Squib Polyanarchy in as many days, following yesterday's declaration of the Jedi order as "koovy."

Dean of Aldera Suspended

ALDERA, ALDERAAN - Putting an end to a three-month scandal in the halls of higher learning on Alderaan, Provost Dalus Othona formally censured and suspended Dean Halcor Raystel. The investigation into the Dean's improprieties began after numerous student complaints that his frequent lectures were increasingly offtopic and erratic. The charges compounded when it was revealed that Raystel propositioned two female students, offering course credits in exchange for personal relations. Drug

tests further proved Raystel to be a ryll abuser. Raystel, staying at his Delaya-based cottage, refused comment. Raystel had long been a controversial thorn in the University's side, ever since his appointment drew accusations of nepotism given Raystel's lackluster credentials.

Baby Ludi Holos Flood UoC Datanet

UNI-COR CAMPUS 12, CORUSCANT - Student activists have overloaded two University of Coruscant datanet hubs with trillions upon trillions of holographic pictures of Baby Ludi, the infant that is the subject of a custody dispute involving the Jedi Temple. Around 0215 this morning, an automated slicer program began duplicating and propagating the holo images at an exponential rate. The images began to fill the public data-space of the University network, overwriting any files students had stored there. By 1330 this afternoon, both public hubs were completely filled. The images, captured from a HoloNet News report, were doctored to include the caption, "I'd rather be with Mom than Mace," in reference to senior Jedi Council member, Mace Windu. The Campus Information Office has no leads but is investigating the matter.

Valorum & Gunray Bracket Ends of Book Sales

MID-RIM NODE - TriPlanetary Press has a hit and a bomb on their hands this season. Published on the same date two months ago, the separate biographies of Trade Federation Viceroy Nute Gunray and former Supreme Chancellor Finis Valorum have met with wild reader enthusiasm and resounding disinterest, respectively. The unauthorized and provocative Gunray tell-all, *Gunray On Top*, written by his alleged mistress Lora Besh, has been in the top ten bestsellers for 14 weeks. Conversely, Valorum's staid autobiography, *Holding Back the Tide*, has yet to break into the top 100. "I don't know -- I guess I'm just not that interested in Valorum right now," says a self-described avid reader on TriPlanetary's review list. "Maybe, like, after he dies?"

FOURTH WEEK SUMMARY

Plenty of new discoveries again. This planet's penchant for exotic life-forms seems inexhaustible!

One multilegged armored creature—which we named the butcherbug—spins a tough, microfine wire between the roots of the towering gnarltrees. The wireweb is invisible unless seen under exactly the right conditions. When a flying creature blunders into this trap, the microwire slices it into pieces, which the butcherbug then scuttles down to devour before meticulously cleaning the gore from its invisible web.

In the dimmest underworld of the swamp, some animals have developed bioluminescent patches to light their own way through the undergrowth or to attract prey.

One hairy herbivore, the spotlight sloth, patiently forages until it finds a large succulent plant on which it prefers to feed. When it has located a succulent studded with tough-skinned flower-fruits, the sloth illuminates bright glowing patches on its chest. Then it waits. After an hour or so, the tough skin of the flower-fruit unfolds to bask in the light, revealing a treasure of sticky purplish berries, on which the spotlight sloth feeds.

Larger predators are rare in the bogs, but deadly. This week we had the great good fortune to observe the titanic battle between a giant swamp slug and a mammoth dragonsnake. Both huge creatures inhabit the water channels through the swamp, swimming through the black, peaty water and rooting out their food.

The giant swamp slug is an omnivore, eating anything it can pull into its lipless gash of a mouth. Small animals, decaying vegetation, even larger aquatic life-forms, are sucked through a long throat/mouth lined with thousands of tiny, grinding teeth that can pulverize all organic matter into a digestible mass. Like construction machinery, the swamp slugs plow an inexorable path through the bog, devouring everything in their way.

The dragonsnake, on the other hand, is a more active predator, seeking out victims that venture too close to the water's edge. The snake can rear up and slash at an animal with its fangs or its razor fins, knock it into the oily water, and then crush the prey in its coils.

We were collecting fungus specimens when the duel between the swamp slug and the dragonsnake took us by surprise. Reconstructing the event afterward, we believe the incident began because the slug had blundered into the dragonsnake's nest, chewing the beast's home as it went.

During the resulting battle, the dragonsnake managed to bore through the slug's main body and slash off great chunks of meat. But swamp slugs have few vital organs, and this one seemed unaffected by the injuries. Dripping green-brown ichor, the slug reared up and plunged down again on top of the writhing dragonsnake, opening wide its huge, lipless mouth. Once the swamp slug managed to get the snake's barbed head into its tooth-lined gullet, the battle was over.

We watched and recorded for nearly an hour as the swamp slug ponderously swallowed the entire length of the armored dragonsnake, rumbling and chewing, before it wheeled about and continued devouring its way through the bog.

Our team members stood stunned. We had never before seen such a struggle.

Eight weeks before the Battle Of Geonosis

HOLONET NEWS

Volume 351. #48. 13:3:21

Palpatine to Separatists: Let's Talk

GALACTIC CITY, CORUSCANT - Supreme Chancellor Palpatine once again took to the HoloNet, not to announce an impending vote or Senate session, but instead to offer an open invitation to Count Dooku, popular leader of the Separatist movement, to parley.

"There are many on both sides of this grand debate eager to turn this dispute into war. It needn't degenerate into so wasteful an outcome. Together, we have the intelligence and the reason to find an alternative solution."

Palpatine was firm, composed, yet showed signs of exhaustion in the brief, 12-minute address. He sat at his elegant chair in his Executive Office. No aides attended Palpatine, though his controversial Red Guards did silently flank him. The transmission overrode all government channels and 90 percent of private feeds, interrupting regular programming. Visible to trillions upon trillions of viewers, Palpatine's address was directed to a single spectator -- Count Dooku himself.

"I appeal to your sensibilities developed as a revered Jedi. I was witness not only to your practiced brand of diplomacy during the Sevarcos Dispute of three decades ago, but also of your former apprentice's noble efforts to protect the sovereign of my world. From these examples, I know you are a proponent of peace.

"We have much in common, sir, for it is the inefficiencies of the Republic that are the focus of my Chancellery. But the solution lies not in insurrection, but rather through reform. The system will work, and together we will make it work."

Count Dooku's whereabouts are unknown, necessitating the Chancellor's HoloNet-wide address. The former Jedi Master and Count of Serenno disappeared ten years ago, only to re-emerge two years ago at various Mid and Inner Rim worlds with a fiery rhetoric that has fueled the Separatist movement.

The Jedi Council has consistently dismissed claims that Dooku's orders have resulted in the scattered flashpoints of violence throughout the galaxy. Instead, they attribute the skirmishes to opportunists simply using the banner of the Separatists to pursue their own agendas.

"It is with great regret that we reflect upon the loss of Master Dooku from the order," said Senior Jedi Council member Mace Windu last year, following the secessionist-sparked Battle of Antar 4. "But he is still the product of Jedi training and upbringing. It is impossible that he is stirring the Separatists to take up arms."

At the end of his address, Chancellor Palpatine named Bothawui, a neutral world, as a potential site for conference. Though he did not name a date for security reasons, the Chancellor did announce that all avenues of communication to his office were open to the Count.

Pundits are split as to the end result of Palpatine's message, and what it means to his political career. "I applaud the Supreme Chancellor's attempt at looking for peaceful avenues," said Senator Orn Free Taa (Ryloth). "That he should take this initiative, seemingly without consultation, is troubling, though."

"It's shameful," said Senator Onaconda Farr (Rodia). "He's trying to outtalk a fire consuming our worlds, or negotiate a dam from bursting. Why not just hand over the Republic to that mind-wizard? He's a fool if he thinks this cowardly misstep is going to blunt the Military Creation Act."

Others, like Senator R'shinnos Sh'neel (Genassa), are reserving judgment until further developments. "It was a careful bid. The Chancellor may be meek, but he is an intelligent man. I wouldn't underestimate him. He's up to something, I can promise you that."

Kashyyyk/Trandosha Talks to Shaky Start

HSSKHOR, TRANDOSHA - Jedi Master Oppo Rancisis arrived today for the first day of the Kashyyyk/Trandosha peace negotiations, though critics of the Jedi were quick to point out that had the delegation arrived four weeks ago, considerable bloodshed would have been averted.

A long-standing blood-feud between the Wookiees and the Trandoshas have brought their neighboring worlds to the brink of war. In addition to these

tensions, Rancisis was to address the long-standing problem of slavery within the Trandosha borders, and the ongoing Trandosha petition for representation within the Senate.

Four weeks ago, the assault of a Wookiee passenger shuttle over one of Trandosha's moons escalated the already tense situation. Wookiee Senator Yarua used his position to blockade trade to Trandosha until the bodies of the 215 Wookiee passengers could be returned to Kashyyyk for proper burial. The Trandoshaans refused, blaming the assault on rogue dissidents, and claiming that Yarua had overstepped his authority. They again cited that Wookiee representation of the Kashyyyk system in the Senate has historically been to the detriment of the Trandosha people.

"Where were the Jedi peace-keepers then?" asked a Wroonian spectator, one of hundreds of cross-species activists of various political-leanings amassed outside the Hsskhor Tally-house Meeting Halls. "If they had considered this a worthwhile effort last month, then 200 Wookiees and 150 Trandoshaans would still be alive." Similar sentiments were expressed on local Kashyyyk newsnets. If Trandosha is given concessions amounting to Senate recognition, many believe Senator Yarua would remove Kashyyyk from the Senate altogether and join the Separatist movement.

Corporate Alliance Attacks Slicer Compound

FAKIR SECTOR NODE - Forces of the Corporate Alliance unleashed volleys of missile-delivered retribution to an industrial espionage training center on a remote asteroid in the Fakir sector. Yirt-4138-Grek-12, a 65-kilometer diameter airless rock, became the grave-site for 25 cybernetically-enhanced data thieves when Corporate Alliance tank droids leveled a clandestine compound funded by unknown parties.

"The compound contained unauthorized cybernetic surgery suites that were churning out vessels and cyborgs that have been slicing into Corporate Alliance data-stores," said Corporate Alliance Magistrate Passel Argente in a holo-message dispatched to shareholders. "This potential revenue-threat has been neutralized."

A rash of corporate thievery was discovered in the Fakir sector last month with the arrest of Denlace Sachoore, a 24-year old Corporate Alliance clerk found embezzling data in a cranium-implanted vessel drive. Questioning by Alliance expeditors traced her surgery and training back to the asteroid compound.

In a 7-2 vote, the Alliance Exec board ordered immediate action. Corporate Alliance transports delivered the tank droids 10 kilometers from the compound, which then traveled overland and breached the structure's pressurization with missile and laser volleys.

Some Republic Senators have gone on record as being concerned with the Alliance's protection measures, finding their tank droids excessive. On several occasions, Corporate Alliance executives have demonstrated that their tank droids fall within legal boundaries.

"It's all in the clear, as far as the letter of the law goes," admits Senator Gopple (Erigorm). "But it couldn't be more retrograde to the spirit of the law. Since the asteroid was in Alliance space, and clearly in their jurisdiction, though, there's nothing wrong with what they did, legally speaking."

"We will do all we can to protect our assets and intellectual properties," said Argente, concluding his message.

Senator Horox Ryyder Retires

OZLYN GOX, GRAVLEX MED - Bringing an end to over five decades in politics, revered Senator Horox Ryyder retired in a quiet and informal gathering of friends and colleagues in his family compound on Gravlex Med yesterday.

"I trust the younger generation to bring about peace where we have failed," said Ryyder. "My fuel has been spent keeping what order I could. Fresh talent can now continue where I have left off."

To that end, Ryyder appointed former Gravlex Med President Zo Howler and his Secondary, Fo Kuna, as his successors. The two will begin Senatorial duty on 3:30, continuing Ryyder's campaign against the Military Creation Act.

Among the politicians present at the gathering were Senator Bail Organa and former Senator Bail Antilles of Alderaan. Organa presented Ryyder with the Royal Chalcedony Shield, a medal of recognition typically given only to Alderaanians.

"For your peerless championing of civic virtue and uncompromising moral convictions, Alderaan looks to adopt you, Horox Ryyder, as a heroic son. While she is saddened by your departure from the government, she and all her

people are indebted to your countless contributions to peace and freedom," said Organa.

Zorba the Hutt Sentenced to 45 Years

GIRIGARD, KIP - The tiny inhabitants of Kip have dealt a large blow to the Desilijic Hutt clan with the conviction of legitimate businessman Zorba Desilijic Tiure for the illegal removal of ulikuo stones. The gems are valued for aesthetics and industrial applications, but their cultural significance warrants unauthorized mining a crime punishable by lifetime imprisonment.

Prime Justice Doori-Doori sentenced the influential Hutt business leader to 15 Kip years (roughly 45 standard years) imprisonment in the Girigard Subsurface Correctional Facility. Zorba's lawyer, famed Nimbanel attorney Bequin Fobas attempted to appeal, only to be reminded by the magistrate that Kip has no appeal process.

The Grand Council of Nal Hutta sought extradition of Zorba, so that he could be tried by a council of peers within Hutt Space, but local laws blockaded that legal avenue as well. Third party Republic Judiciaries backed Kip provisions preventing Zorba's departure.

Not all Hutt potentates were against the trial, as rival Besadii clan leader Aruk the Hutt applauded the verdict. "Zorba has been a shameful pus-filled boil on the glorious Hutt business community, and this sentencing is a heated lancing long overdue. His selfish antics have given an unwarranted criminal taint to the Hutt reputation that can now begin to rebuild with his absence."

Desilijic clan leaders will abide by the sentence, but have launched their own investigation into the affair, believing Zorba to have been set up by business rivals. "We will respect the findings of the Kip Prime Justice," said Desilijic leader Jiliac the Hutt, "but it's our contention that our brother was deliberately misled as to the nature of local customs by parties looking to profit from his absence."

Zorba's son Jabba the Hutt, an influential shipping magnate in the Outer Rim, wasted no time seizing Zorba's properties on Nar Shaddaa, Shaum Hii and Tyne's Horky in an effort to protect them.

Kip penal security forces have been placed on full alert as breakout attempts were deemed likely by the Prime Justice.

People's Inquest Demand Jedi Budget Reports

JUDICIAL ARCOLOGY, CORUSCANT - The Judicial Department has denied the People's Inquest demands to reveal budgetary information regarding the Jedi order. The People's Inquest, a Coruscant-based lobbying group built around enforcing the accountability of the Jedi order, began the formal petition for information following last week's unveiling of the new Jedi starfighter.

"We, as the tax-payers that subsidize the Judicial Department and the Jedi order have every right to see how those credits are spent. How much is this new fancy toy costing us, the people who are now finding it difficult to clothe and feed our families?" said Inquest leader Thrynka Padaunete through a loud-hailer before a vociferous crowd of supporters gathered at the steps of the Jedi Temple.

Citing security concerns, the Judicial Department denied the request. "Especially in such times, security takes precedent. There are enemies of the Republic that could exploit such information," Judicial Department Information Director Laddinare Torbin told HoloNet news.

The People's Inquest, which has set up a temporary camp outside the Jedi Temple last month, will continue its pursuit of information, said Padaunete. Their petition has already garnered "several million" signatures, she told her followers.

The popular movement has been gaining support since Jedi public opinion plummeted following their failure to prevent the Battle of Antar 4.

Baby Ludi's Mother to Appear on *Essence*

PHELAR, ERIADU - Jonava Billane, mother of Baby Ludi, the infant subject of a heated custody dispute with the Jedi Council, will appear on an upcoming episode of *Essence*, the popular talk show based out of Eriadu.

Eriadu network executives will pay for Billane's transit to the Seswenna sector. "We're doing a full hour with Jonava," said Producer Garox Tronten. "We're not going the microsecond blip route. This is an important story and we want to devote a full hour examining the insides, the outs, the layers, the whole

deal. Are the Jedi kidnapping and raising an army of mind-controlled youths? We'll get to the bottom of it." The episode will premiere on the 3rd. The previously scheduled interview with Mas Amedda will be rotated to later this year.

FIFTH WEEK SUMMARY

Ranging even farther this week into the wilderness, discovering new environments.

In some sections of the swamp, where the ground is too rocky and rugged for anything other than scrubby ground cover, clearings appear, opening up rare canyons through the canopy high above. Fog clings in these low areas, drifting over rounded boulders and dense fungus forests.

Lightning flickers deep beneath the stormclouds and mist. Above, unpredictable air currents create only occasional rifts in the cloudbanks.

For a few minutes each day, a shaft of sunlight pierces the rift in the treetop canopy to shine down on the moorish ground. As the ribbon of light touches the rounded fungus balls, the mushrooms expand rapidly and explode, showering spores across the ground.

We discovered these exploding fungi accidentally when we came upon one of these mushroom covered clearings, shining our portable illuminators into the fungus forest. In every direction in which we turned our lights, detonations sent spores flying thick through the air, like a devastating battle. Already on edge from the uneasy silence of the swamp world and covered with foul-smelling and sticky spores, my team members and I fled.

Related now, in the safety of our camp shelter, the adventure seems somewhat amusing to me, but the spraying white spores and the loud explosions echoing through the misty forests made for a terrifying experience indeed.

Seven weeks before the Battle Of Geonosis

HOLONET NEWS

Volume 351. #49. 13:3:28

Palpatine forms Loyalist Committee

Steering Committee to assist Negotiations

GALACTIC CITY, CORUSCANT - In anticipation of future negotiations with the Separatists as well as to assist in the general handling of the crisis, Supreme Chancellor Palpatine revealed the members of the newly formed Loyalist Committee today.

"I turn to some of the most trusted, skilled and intelligent minds that the Republic has to offer," Palpatine said after Senate session today. "This is the team that will help me forge a peaceful end to the current dispute."

The committee of 10 Senators will serve in diplomatic and strategic capacity, developing a six-month action plan to engage Separatist elements, negotiate, and settle disputes.

The 10 Senators represent a wide range of worlds, from the Core Worlds to the distant Outer Rim, and regions in-between. Almost immediately after the announcement of the committee's formation, vocally critical Senators in the assembly accused Palpatine of forming a partisan body to sway the upcoming Military Creation Act vote.

"When will the Supreme Chancellor drop the guise of unity and admit that he's consolidating political allies in an attempt to water down the Military Creation Act or subvert the vote altogether?" shouted Senator Onaconda Farr (Rodia).

"The Military Creation Act is an entirely different issue, and has nothing to do with our unity efforts," Loyalist Senator Padmé Amidala (Naboo) explained later at the media conference. "This committee clearly reflects that, what with disparate views on the army debate being well represented in our ranks."

"The young Senator from Naboo is undoubtedly referencing me in that statement," said Aks Moe (Malastare). "And yes, we aren't all political allies. But we do have a love of the Republic in common, and I think that's very symbolic of this committee's goals. Putting aside our differences to work together is a microcosm of the greater whole."

"Rather than sniff out conspiracy in every corner, I think this is just a political save-face maneuver," said Senator Tashrikam (Grizmallt). "After the embarrassment of last week's plea to Dooku, I think Palpatine's finally getting some real direction by turning to those more proactive than he."

"My colleagues have demonstrated a tireless devotion to the Republic and its virtues. They have given so much to the cause of unity, that together, in the union of this committee, I am confident that a solution will be found. I will not go down in history as the last Chancellor of the Republic," said a determined Palpatine.

The Loyalist Committee

Senator Bail Organa (Alderaan, Core)
Senator Orn Free Taa (Ryloth, Outer Rim)
Senator Aks Moe (Malastare, Mid Rim)
Senator Darsana (Glee Anselm, Mid Rim)
Acting Senator Zo Howler (Gravlex Med, Outer Rim)
Senator Ister Paddie (Sermeria. Expansion)
Senator Padmé Amidala (Naboo, Mid Rim)
Senator Ronet Coorr (Iseno, Inner Rim)
Senator Lexi Dio (Uyter, Mid Rim)
Senator Havriso Looruya (Yir Tangee, Colonies)

Alderaan Opens to Refugee Relief Movement

CHIANAR, ALDERAAN - Former Supreme Chancellor Finis Valorum rolled up his shirt sleeves and grabbed a power-shovel, breaking soil and chipping in as the Refugee Relief Movement began transforming 100 hectares of donated Alderaanian plains into new homes.

"It's the spirit of helping one another that has made this Republic great, and will see it through its darker hours," said Valorum, who broke a sweat as he dug postholes for the pre-fab structure that would soon be installed.

Valorum was just one of the noteworthy names present. The cause attracted several Alderaanian celebrities, who worked side-by-side with refugees from Separatist worlds in building a new village.

Alderaan has recently opened up its borders, loosening its immigration laws to allow thousands of displaced citizenry to find a home. As more worlds secede, citizens who defy the will of their representatives and still wish to be part of the Republic are left with little alternative. Millions have arrived on Coruscant, creditless and with meager possessions.

"Coruscant's getting even more crowded each day," said Alderaanian RRM Chair Celly Organa, who was in charge of the day's events. "There's plenty of elbow room in the Republic, as long as worlds are willing to share."

The first transport to Alderaan brought 500 new settlers, who helped in erecting pre-fab constructs in the Alderaanian grasslands. Many were visibly moved by the cooperation of so many to aid them.

"This is amazing," said Sandi Maba, an Aqualish mother of two, left homeless since Ando seceded. "There's so much open space. We were staying in a cubicle apartment with another family on Coruscant. This, this is so different and perfect. I'm never going to move from Alderaan. This is now my new home."

Despite the feeling of rejuvenation shared by many, there were still those who scanned the skies, looking to their home sectors, hoping to return. "What everyone's doing here is just fantastic," said Orogor Binn, another Aqualish expatriate. "I can't tell you how appreciative our family is. But as beautiful as it is here, it's not home, and I hope that I can return to the seas of Ando someday and find the rest of my family."

The Refugee Relief Movement is now looking to the Mid Rim to help with the ever-growing number of expatriates.

Jedi Smash Iridium Pirates; 3 Knights Killed

ATRIVIS SECTOR NODE - Sensor reports from the Atrivis sector issued by the Judicial Department confirm that a Jedi task force has thrashed the space pirates of Iridium, bringing an end to their year-long raids along the Atrivis sector routes.

The pirates had been raiding Republic grain and spice convoys, apparently as privateers for nearby Separatist forces. The Jedi were dispatched from Coruscant to begin what was hoped to be peaceful negotiations, but the pirates instead opened fire.

The Jedi taskforce, led by Belsed-Qan Idan and Kit Fisto, consisted of an armed Republic cruiser, the *Monitor III*, supplemented by six new Jedi Delta-7 starfighters. Idan attempted to parley with the pirates, but the raiding group, which consisted of three warpod pinnaces, two Longprow attack cruisers and five Z-95 Headhunter starfighters, moved to attack.

During the skirmish, the Iridium pirates were able to employ their infamous power gem weaponry to strip the taskforce of their shields. This resulted in heavy damage to the *Monitor III*, killing four Republic Judiciaries and two Jedi, Dovish Hokken and Yrada Soludisan. The *Monitor III* was spared destruction by the cover fire provided by the speedy Jedi starfighters.

The Delta-7s quickly disabled the warpods, and the moved in to target the

larger Longprows. Concentrated laser and concussion missile volleys dropped the Longprow shields, allowing the Jedi to target the drive systems of the craft. One Longprow was taken intact, but the second was destroyed in an apparent reactor overload. At least 12 escape pods were seen to leave the craft.

During the attack runs on the Longprows, the Jedi fighters were repeatedly harassed by the less-maneuverable Headhunters. One Jedi starfighter was destroyed in the dogfighting, killing its pilot Jedi Knight Aruden Kej. Four of the Z-95s were destroyed with no survivors, though one Headhunter is unaccounted for, but is believed to have succumbed to the gravity well of nearby Vuchelle and burned up on reentry.

The number of pirates taken captive is unknown, though the *Monitor III* successfully collected all launched escape pods. It is also not known if the Jedi were able to capture a power gem for study.

Sluis Sector Secedes; Seswenna Restates Loyalty

OUTER RIM NODE - With the transmission of Articles of Secession to the Senate, Senator Corlissi Ludar made formal the withdrawal of the Sluis sector from the Republic. Neighboring Seswenna sector representative Senator Shayla Paige-Tarkin responded with an adamant assertion of her sector's loyalty to Supreme Chancellor Palpatine.

The withdrawal of Sluis was largely expected, having been preceded by the extended absence of Senator Ludar from general sessions. Even his secondary functionaries were recalled, leaving the Sluissi Senatorial pod empty for over a month.

Sluis is the latest in a tide of Outer Rim secession traveling Coreward up the Rimma Trade Route. Believed to have been fomented by an appearance by Count Dooku in the Metharian Nebula Territories, the spreading wave has claimed Elrood, Danjar and Tantra sectors.

Seswenna and Mayagil, the next sectors in line, have thus far remained in the Republic. "The disaffected worlds of the Outer Rim have in no way swayed Eriadu and Seswenna's loyalty to the Republic," said Paige-Tarkin. "We stand by Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. Should it even come to war, we will take up arms if Seswenna's worlds become the front line. We are proof that not all worlds in the Outer Rim have a lawless disregard for the heart of the Republic."

Mayagil's Senator Dodra F'ass (Clak'dor VII) has been noncommittal in his loyalties, refusing comment. He is reportedly rushing back to Mayagil to convene with the Bith Ruling Program to discuss his sector's security.

The Sluis sector is a large expanse of sparsely populated space, renowned for its mineral resources and processing facilities. Its primary system, Sluis Van, maintains a formidable shipyard for construction and maintenance. The Praesitlyn system is home to a major HoloNet and subspace communications hub, and the Jedi order maintains a training enclave on Bpfassh.

Senator Dod in Five-Speeder Skylane Accident

FOBOSI DISTRICT, CORUSCANT - After an early morning skyway traffic accident, six injured commuters were rushed to medcenter today, including Trade Federation Senate Representative, Lott Dod. The cause of the accident has been identified as a malfunctioning automated pubtrans flitter that went the wrong direction down skylane T-534D. Commuters rushing to get out of the way collided with an unmanned water silo. Though no one died, six drivers needed to be hospitalized and the silo was breached, flooding the apartment towers beneath it. Dod is listed in stable condition, and will undergo continued bacta therapy and reconstructive surgery later in the week. His lawyers intend to sue the Skyways Flyer pubtrans line.

House of Tagge Sides with Loyalists

UNLOS TAGGE, TEPASI - Baroness Sanya Tagge, leader of the House of Tagge family of nobles, reaffirmed her family's loyalty to the Republic in an address to the people of Tepasi, the Tagge throneworld.

"For generations, the name Tagge has been synonymous with that of the Republic, as the blood of one of the original Founders continues to flow through our veins. We would be remiss not to broadcast to the galaxy at large our undying devotion to the union, our faith in the Supreme Chancellor, and our dedication to serving the people of the Republic," she said.

The House of Tagge is the owner of The Tagge Company (TaggeCo), a leading mining and heavy manufacturing concern with extremely diversified assets. TaggeCo is the owner of Bonadan Heavy Industries, Tagge Mining Company, GalResource Industries, Mobquet Swoops and Speeders, Gowix Computers and the Tagge Restaurant Association.

This pledge of allegiance is an unusual move for so large a corporate body, given that ruling commerce entities such as the Trade Federation, the Commerce Guild and the Techno Union have attempted to remain neutral during the Separatist crisis.

Baroness Tagge kept the platitudes vague, confirming her family's loyalty but not specifying anything in the form of resource donation to the ailing Republic. The House of Tagge maintains a private fleet of over 5,000 armed scout starships and a private army of over one million troops.

Weequay/Houk Arraignment End in Violence

JUDICIAL ARCOLOGY, CORUSCANT - The first in a series of arraignments for offenders arrested in this month's Eastport gang brawl between Houks and Weequay immigrants ended in violence. At a Judicial Hearing Chamber Y-76 the accused, 22-year old Ker-Zakk and 23-year old Egome Fass overpowered bailiffs and began fighting. After security stunned the two combatants into unconsciousness, presiding Judicial Official Warren Sloat called for an extended recess. Hearings will resume tomorrow. The cases are expected to go to trial sometime in the next two years.

Sepan Civil War Escalates

SEPAN SECTOR NODE - Despite the best efforts of Jedi negotiators, the hostilities between the worlds of Dimok and Ripoblus have resumed. The decades-long civil war came to a month-long standstill during negotiations headed by Jedi Knights Empatojayos Brand, Bultar Swan and Chellemi Chuovvick. Upon the Jedi's return to Coruscant, the conflict flared up again, this time over whether Sepan should secede or not. This was the third mission dispatched by Jedi to the Sepan sector in the past five years. A fourth one is expected.

SIXTH WEEK SUMMARY

Our short-range vehicle had so far proven mostly useless for travel through the dense tangle of the swamp. But we did manage to pilot it straight upward through a gash in the thick trees for a three-day expedition to Dagobah's astonishing canopy level.

Parts of the canopy rise above the swirling soup of mist and break free into intermittent sunshine. Separated from the boggy, decaying landscape far below, the treetops offer an entirely different ecosystem.

When our small vehicle breached the thick murk, my team let out a collective gasp upon seeing the dazzling sunlight after so many days in the gray dampness of the lower levels. It seemed to me that I had never seen anything so beautiful. I could not remember natural light being so *bright* and so warm. Our morale jumped several notches in only a few seconds.

Under the nourishing sunlight, the stretching gnarltrees bring forth a blanket of tender leaves. Vines wind among the treetops, displaying brilliant flowers and dangling long, feathery roots to absorb moisture from the clinging mists. One species of vine-flower bears a segmented crystalline coating that acts like a prism, breaking the reflected sunlight into glittering rainbows.

Numerous small rodents scurry across the dense, matted roof of leaves and intertwined twigs, feeding on tender shoots and nesting only a few inches below the leafy surface.

Riding thermals overhead, reptilian flying creatures search for movement in the canopy and swoop down to snatch up the rodents. When shadows of the flying predators pass over the treetops, the rodents set up a chattering alarm and flee in hidden channels to their nests—as they did whenever we flew over. (Apparently they thought we were some new and enormous flying hunter.) Seen from above, the panicked rodents make a churning storm through the leaves. The reptilian flyers cannot dig deeply enough into the tangled twigs to go after their prey—but we noticed that the rodents usually did not all manage to get to safety in time.

We compared these reptilian flyers to a similar creature that inhabits the lower reaches of the swamp. Perhaps they are the same species, although with the denser foliage, the lower-level denizen grows to barely half the wingspan of its larger cousins.

Our fuel was limited, and we could not stay long above the trees. We were saddened to leave behind the sunshine. But we had our work to do.

[Ed. Note—several records here are missing.]

Six weeks before the Battle Of Geonosis

HOLONET NEWS

Volume 351. #50. 13:4:04

Senator Moe Killed in Blast

SENATE ROTUNDA, CORUSCANT - For the fifth time this sidereal, tragic events forced a session of the Galactic Congress to be suspended today when word reached Coruscant that Senator Aks Moe (Malastare) was killed in a suspected Separatist attack during a state visit to Aargau.

"This is truly horrific," said acting representative Ask Aak at the close of session today. "That this tragedy should occur so deep within our borders points to the irrevocable damage already sustained by the Republic. It is not only a tragic loss to Malastare and Kinyen, but also a dire warning to the Supreme Chancellor."

Aargau, a key world of the InterGalactic Banking Clan, rests inside the Core World boundaries. Moe was to meet with Banking Clan representatives to discuss possible funding options for a proposed Republic military initiative. Senator Moe was boarding his staff speeder for a visit to the Commodities Exchange Cathedral in New Escrow. At approximately 0824 standard time, the speeder merged onto the automated expressway and had its propulsion systems slaved into the city's traffic network. At this time, its power plant overloaded and the speeder exploded.

Moe's traveling companion and two Dug servants were also killed in the blast. Eighteen commuters were injured. IBC representatives have not yet announced the cost of the damages, nor the accumulated interest.

No party has stepped forward to claim responsibility for the bombing. Popular opinion points to the secessionist movement, as Moe was a member of the Loyalist Committee. The vocal Senator did also make a number of political and personal enemies throughout his career. Nine years ago, Moe was implicated in a conspiracy to disrupt the Lannik peace negotiations hosted by Malastere.

Some in the Malastarian government have been quick to criticize the lack of Jedi presence at Aargau. "Where are our vaunted guardians of peace and justice?" asked Representative Ainlee Teem. "Where was their all-powerful

Force this time?"

Though no official word has come from the Jedi Temple, it has been previously reported that Aargau's assigned Jedi watchman, Belsed-Qan Idan, was re-assigned to the Atrivis sector to quell a Separatist-funded pirate uprising.

Garbage Launcher Misfire Kills 48; Closes Desrini

DESRINI DISTRICT, CORUSCANT - The Desrini district of northern Coruscant is still closed following a catastrophic garbage launcher misfire that has killed at least 48 and has littered the entire district with dangerous industrial waste. At 0801 this morning, Waste Canister Delivery Port 84-D-21 launched its regularly scheduled payload of industrial refuse sealed in a shielded container. The projectile came into contact with a sizable obstruction, causing it to shred apart within the launcher barrel. The entire cannon assembly collapsed, taking out the four surrounding city blocks.

Emergency rescue crews arrived on the scene in less than half an hour, and have been working since then to clear the rubble. At least 48 bodies have been recovered, and over 200 injuries have been reported.

The rescue crews have identified the barrel obstruction as a shantytown of refugees living within the launch chamber. "From the looks of it, there were at least four families of squatters living between the fourth and fifth accelerator gates. They had tapped into the cannon's energy grid which disabled its obstruction sensors," said Captain Nigella Mure of Desrini Rescue Ops.

The destroyed canister contained 115 metric tons of concentrated industrial waste, including hyperbaride run-off, tricorrinium hexifluorine and destabilized hrucium. The canister's explosion has spread this waste over the disaster site, and emergency workers are dressed in full toxgear to carry out rescue efforts. The Coruscant WeatherNet has canceled prevailing winds in the area, but natural air currents caused by undercity convection is spreading a dangerous cloud of industrial toxins. All non-pressurized structures in the surrounding 10 kilometer radius have been evacuated.

Kashyyyk / Trandosha Talks Break Down

HSSKHOR, TRANDOSHA - The Kashyyyk / Trandosha peace negotiations disintegrated today when word reached Wookiee delegates that a Trandosha initiative for Senate representation was being aided by the Trade Federation. Crovessk, CEO of Trandosha's Revessa Global Shipping, was able to schedule an

appeal to the Senate next month through contacts with Trade Federation Representative Lott Dod. The Trandoshans have been petitioning for Senate representation for years.

Upon hearing of this development, Senator Yarua not only withdrew his delegation, but violently destroyed the interpreter droid translating the talks. "These meetings are meaningless if such actions can go on outside this conference," was all the terse Yarua shared with reporters on his way back to the Hsskhor spaceport.

Despite his efforts, Jedi Master Oppo Rancisis was unable to reconvene the delegates. The Wookiees departed aboard their starship, returning to neighboring Kashyyyk. The Wookiees, who represent the system in the Senate, have been restricting trade to Trandosha for the past five weeks following a Trandoshan attack on a Wookiee passenger shuttle.

Camaasi and Alderaanian peace officers led by Rancisis have been trying to work out a solution between the feuding neighbors for two weeks. Given the growing Separatist-fueled crises along the Outer Rim, unsubstantiated reports indicate that Rancisis may be recalled by the Jedi Council and reassigned, leaving the talks to the remaining peace officers.

Many political analysts believe this already tense situation will be exacerbated by the Outer Rim slave ring scandal. "Given the Wookiee temperament, this may be the final insult and all the reason they need to withdraw from a disrespectful Republic altogether. Wookiees are renowned for their loyalty, but that loyalty will only extend so far," said Senator Darsana (Glee Anselm).

Isard Spearheads Republic Intelligence Reform

SBI CENTRAL, CORUSCANT - Armand Isard, Director of the Senate Bureau of Intelligence, has been empowered by the Supreme Chancellor's Loyalist Committee to reform the Republic's largest intelligence organization in light of increased security concerns.

"For too long the unscrupulous have been taking advantage of chinks in the bureau's armor. I say, 'no more.' The SBI will be a vital weapon in the fight against those who would fragment our Republic, and not a tool of convenience for the wealthy and corrupt," said Isard.

To that end, Isard has formed a Crisis Branch, a temporary division of

Intelligence historically created when the need arises. Running this new branch is a committee of hand-picked Intelligence subdirectors from planetary bureaus throughout the Core Worlds. This is the first time in over 60 years that a Crisis Branch has been formed.

The first act of the Crisis Branch has been the firing of 32 remote intelligence subdirectors throughout the Mid Rim, an area Isard described as "rife with corruption."

"There comes a time when a structure is so riddled by greddleback bugs that you have to tear it down and build anew. If that what it takes to root out the corrupt, that's what I will do," said the determined Isard.

Some Senators have expressed concerns that Palpatine's measures have gone too far. "This is further proof that the Loyalist Committee is little more than a front to increase the Supreme Chancellor's powers," an agitated Senator Onaconda Farr said from the Rodian Consulate.

Isard asserts that such measures will help eliminate systemic flaws in Intelligence's methods, preventing such notorious mishaps as the failure to predict the Naboo blockade of a decade ago, or the Yinchorri incident previous that.

The Crisis Branch will communicate directly with the Jedi Council and the Loyalist Committee. Security analysts predict that after SBI's reform, three other agencies will undergo similar inspection: the Republican Security Organization, the Interstellar Consortium on Technology, and the Special Acquisitions Branch of the Library of the Republic.

Lahara Sector Secedes

SENATE ROTUNDA, CORUSCANT - Continuing a tide of Outer Rim secessions, the Lahara sector, represented by Senator Tyreca Bremack, formally announced its separation from the Republic during Senate session today. "I have no doubt that many of my colleagues here have no idea where the Lahara sector is. They couldn't even find it on a map if their careers depended on it, but we've been burdened with high taxes and little to show for it for too long," said Bremack, as she tendered her Articles of Secession. "Perhaps now you'll notice us, if only for our absence." The Lahara sector consists of 245 settled worlds, most of them agricultural producers.

Shots Fired in Andoan Space

MID RIM NODE - A Republic courier ship reported being fired upon when traveling in Andoan space, an alarming development that some Senators are calling a "prelude to war."

Captain Kendra Tissido of the ship *Quickwit* met with reporters after being debriefed by Republic security officials. As she explained to reporters, she and her crew of five reverted the *Quickwit* from hyperspace outside the Ando system to recalibrate navcomputer settings.

"I thought I was far enough out from Ando that it wouldn't be a problem," said Tissido. "They don't have a space force, so I wasn't too concerned. Then this big blip shows up on my scope, and I realized I wasn't alone."

Tissido described the ship as under 250 meters in length, probably in the frigate-class. "I didn't stick around to look too closely," she said. "It let out about five droid starfighters and I knew I had to get out of there." Tissido was able to outmaneuver the fighters by jumping into hyperspace, though her courier ship did sustain some light damage.

Tissido's testimony sent a current of alarm through the Senate session today, since Ando has been without an armed planetary security force since the Republic demilitarization of the planet. Tissido's citing of "droid starfighters" suggest that modern weaponry has found its way into Aqualish hands.

"This is nothing short of an open act of warfare. I would ask the Senator representing the Trade Federation if he would agree with my perception that somebody somewhere is making a profit here by arming our Aqualish neighbors," said Senator Rasit Brun (Rintonne).

"What the Senator from Lambda sector is insinuating is outrageous!" countered Trade Federation Senator Lott Dod, via comlink from his recuperative ward at the Fobrini hospital. "You are constructing slander from the anecdotes of a frightened delivery girl." The Senate then broke into a disarray of arguments before order was restored by Speaker of the Senate, Mas Amedda.

Republic security officials are currently examining Tissido's sensor logs to determine the extent of Andoan's military build up and identify the model of

droid starfighter involved in the pursuit.

"I had hoped we had seen the last of open, unprovoked hostility at Antar 4," said Senator Eeshrin Ot'Hyne (Caamas) "This event has, sadly, proven me wrong."

Senators Implicated in Slave Ring

YRACTOS, GYNDINE - Recently disclosed documents and testimony from a captured Thalassian slaver on Gyndine have implicated four Outer Rim Senators as profiting from slaving ventures in their sectors. Senator Tikkes (Mon Calamari), Senator Bufus Ritsomas (Till Chorios), Senator Danry Ledwellow (Er'kit) and Senator Wuja Wojaine (Pydyr) were all implicated.

"These four Senators were named by a known Thalassian slaver during plea bargain sessions prior to trial. Our investigations were able to corroborate these claims, uncovering a lucrative slaving ring that saw all four Senators receive kickback money in return for letting these activities go on in their sectors," said Jurisconsult Temlet Dodann.

The four Senators were operating in isolation, Dodann explained, apparently unaware of each other's involvement with the Thalassians.

The Outer Rim has a long history of slavery despite Republic efforts to outlaw the practice. Slavery has generally been attributed to organized criminal ventures or unscrupulous corporate bodies requiring affordable labor.

The diffuse Republic presence in the Outer Rim has fostered the growth of such organizations as the Zygerrians, the Thalassians and the Karazaks, slaving groups named for the star systems that harbor them. Their scope encompasses numerous sectors and their profits exceed billions of credits.

The Republic Judiciary and the Jedi Knights have tangled with these slavers in the rare instances that these groups attempt to operate closer to the Core. The Thalassian who implicated the Senators was arrested last month when she attempted to sell a dozen Twi'lek slaves on Gyndine.

"Few cultures have suffered as much from slavery as the Twi'leks, and to know that that kind of blood money has reached as far as the Senate sickens me. I say throw the leeches out of office, and then let them have a taste of the shackles themselves!" said an angry Orn Free Taa (Ryloth).

The four Senators have had their positions suspended pending trial. They will be detained in their respective embassies on Coruscant until arraignment hearings which are scheduled to begin next week.

Jedi Vs. The Force of a Mother's Love

PHELAR, ERIADU - Four times during last night's transmission of *Essence*, Jonava Billane broke down into tears, pleading with the Jedi Council for the release of her 14-month old toddler, Ludi.

"Not a day goes by that I don't think of her," she said on the popular Eriadu-based talk show. "When I was lying in that hospital bed, unable to move, the only thing that kept me going, the thing that made me better, was knowing she was out there, somewhere, asking for her mother."

Seven months ago, when groundquakes devastated Domitree, the capital of Ord Thoden, Jonava and Ludi were separated. While Jonava convalesced in an outskirt town, the baby girl was found by Jedi rescue workers and discovered to have Force potential. Assuming her birth mother to be dead, the Jedi took the child to their temple on Coruscant.

When Jonava recovered and learned of her daughter's kidnapping, she used her meager funds to travel to Coruscant and formally petition the Jedi Council to return her child. The Council refused, citing Ludi's beginning of Jedi training as far too late to return the girl, who was now named Aris-Del Wari.

"They said it was dangerous," she said, choking back tears. "I'll never understand, in a million years, how my daughter can be a danger. They're guardians of peace and justice. Well, how is letting me see her again a threat to peace and justice? Who is the monster? Is it me? Is it her? I don't think so."

Since her petition's refusal eight weeks ago, the Baby Ludi case has drawn a lot of public and media attention. The *Essence* holoprogram recapped notable events, such as the proliferation of trillions of Baby Ludi images on the Coruscant student data network, the Mothers United March on Alsakan and the star-packed fund-raising mediathon held in the Minos Cluster.

"I want to thank everyone who's supported me," said Billane. "Your messages and holos and credit advances have meant so much. It's nice to know that we still do live in a galaxy of compassion."

Perhaps the highest profile development is the authorization of a feature-length holo of the drama, to be delivered by Kailio Entertainments for the fall season. The currently untitled Baby Ludi feature is estimated to be a deal worth over 100 million credits, though Billane refused to elaborate.

"I've been told not to discuss that here," she said "but a significant portion of that money has gone to charitable ventures and agencies willing to help me in my fight."

At that point, *Essence* turned the cameras on Thrynka Padaunete, Billane's appearance manager and leader of the populist People's Inquest movement, a Jedi-accountability watch-group.

"Let's look at it this way. Say I were to tell you about a group of mystics on some planet who routinely snatch children away from their mothers, their fathers, tearing apart families. They take these children into their care, strip them of identity, maybe even give them new names. They then cut their hair to all look the same and make them wear the same clothes, and live by an impossibly strict code that only serves to further their order. Sounds like a cult, doesn't it? Well, it's a cult that we as taxpayers subsidize. A cult that we empower to determine who's right and who's wrong in this galaxy. And according to them, a mother's love is wrong," said Padaunete.

The Jonava Billane program is believed to have been watched by over 25 billion viewers. It will be retransmitted on the 18th and is available for permanent storage from Eriadu's HoloNet Node for 24.99, with some of the proceeds benefiting the People's Inquest.

Five weeks before the Battle Of Geonosis

HOLONET NEWS

Volume 351. #51. 13:4:11

Coruscant Restricts Immigration

Capital Now Harder to Enter, Overcrowded Ports are Dangerous

GALACTIC CITY, CORUSCANT - In a move designed to increase local security as well as ease the burden of the already overcrowded arrival ports, the Coruscant Ministry of Ingress has issued new restrictions on all in-bound interstellar traffic.

"The port crowding has reached dangerous levels. We can no longer assure the

safety of newcomers to this world, or to the citizenry residing adjacent to the ports. In the interests of security, these new measures are needed," said Minister Zelebitha Effhod

The new measures include the mandatory requirement of a Core World Visa to all incoming vessels complete with valid Coruscant identi-tags, a BoSS Core Worlds operating license, a Perlemian standard passport and proof of planetary citizenship. Vessels with proper governmental and diplomatic licenses will be exempt from these protocols.

Many of the new arrivals on Coruscant lack any form of proper identification, making it impossible to identify intent. "This is an invitation to disaster," said Effhod. "Any anti-Republic terrorist could pose as a refugee, and we'd have no way of verifying they're who they say they are. That could lead to dangerous situations here, on Coruscant. Even without suspects looking to willfully hurt our people, there are safety concerns. That disaster in the Desrini district was a horrible accident that was a direct result of port overcrowding. Those families living in the barrel were there because they couldn't find anywhere else to go."

Many free traders and independent operators are incensed in the increased bureaucracy. "It's not just the added costs of having to pay for the licenses, though that's bad enough," said Captain Tonner Dauscha, free trader. "In this business, time is money. How long am I going to be held up at port, having to get every little form verified?"

In the past, the Corellian Merchants Guild would have opposed such measures, however since Corellia's withdrawal from the Senate, that powerful lobbying group has lost its voice.

Large interstellar starliners are also feeling the economic pinch, as one of their most popular ports of call may now be priced and complicated out of the comfort range of most of their consumers. "The transit tax made it difficult for refugees to go to the capital. These new ventures may make it altogether impossible, but I guess that's Coruscant's intent, isn't it?" said Galaxy Tours Vice President Bronwynn Koft.

"I'm saddened that it's come to this. Closing the gates should have been a last option, but it's instead become the first choice. What's next? Will Coruscant become the next Corellia?" said Senator Bail Organa (Alderaan), whose world has been taking on displaced citizenry.

The Refugee Relief Movement has been attempting to communicate the option of alternate ports to the traveling homeless. "Culturally, the image of Coruscant has always been as a haven, far removed from any war or disease or poverty," said RRM Spokesbeing Kaysil Verwood. "Many refugees just automatically pick it as their destination port. We're trying to get the word out that there are many, many other worlds in the Core and the Inner Rim that offer just as much opportunity and sanctity. It's been difficult, but I think we are making progress."

Moe Funeral Disrupted by Dug Activists

PIXELITO, MALASTARE - Dug activists, demanding an end to Gran rule of their native Malastare and equal representation in the Galactic Senate, disrupted the funeral of Senator Aks Moe today. What was to be a reverent ceremony presided over by the higher echelons of the Gran Protectorate instead turned into an impromptu Podrace spectacle.

Approximately 70 Dug activists crowded the surrounding fungal greenery, brandishing sports-like banners and pennants customized to read political messages of freedom and equality. Dug musicians blasted theme songs popularized by such past Malastarian Podracers as Sebulba and Ebe E. Endocott, Esq.

The greatest disruption came when an unidentified Dug tore through the procession in a highly modified Radon-Ulzer Podracer, hooking the Gran memorial tapestry in his air-brake scoops.

Toronaxx, the public face of the Dugs-for-Democracy movement, issued a statement via a pirated connection to Malastare's HoloNet node. "We will do anything to bring freedom and justice to our people," her statement read, in part. "Though we did not anything to do with the Senator's death, he was responsible for the death of many of our numbers. The coward should have no rest even now."

The Pixelito constabulary arrested 16 Dugs. Acting-Senator Ask Aak was whisked away for his protection, and was unavailable for comment.

Representative Baskol Yeesrim was forward in his visibly emotional statements. "These Doellin-forsaken animals will not get away with this," he said. "Need I point out, again, that if there were Jedi here, this insult would never have happened."

Port Crowding Increases Virus Risks

EASTPORT, CORUSCANT - With the co-meddling of hundreds of different cultures in confined spaces such as starfreighters and immigration processing stations, Coruscant Health Officials are warning travelers of increased risk of airborne viral contamination.

"The influx of so many different species into Coruscant has created a high-risk situation," said CHO Medxec Harribore Onuta. "We caution everyone to update their immunity programs before interstellar travel or even visiting of transit stations."

The advisory starts a new program of public service announcements and awareness campaigns by the Health Office, sparked by the recent outbreak of Brainworm Rot Type A in the Manarai Heights district. Anomids and Wol Cabasshites in particular have been hit hardest with the pathogen, which officials have managed to contain.

Starport staff have taken care to segregate Neimoidian travelers in separate quarantine chambers prior to admission to immigration processing stations. The Neimoidian biology is a known carrier of the Brainworm Rot virus.

Neimoidians, including Senate representative Lott Dod, have been vocally critical of the move, accusing the Republic government of inequitable treatment. "This is an outrage. It is just another move by the Republic to ostracize and blame our people for what is ultimately their doing," said the convalescing Senator from his Fobosi MedCenter recuperative ward.

What is Brainworm Rot Type A?

An airborne virus that afflicts humanoids and cephalopoids with high levels of dialogen in their bloodstream.

How is it passed?

It resides in the lungs of oxygen-breathers, and is passed by inhalation.

How does one prevent it?

While the use of breath masks hinders transmission, inoculation is still the best method of prevention.

What are the symptoms?

Nausea, cold sweats

Inability to process written instructions

Syntax errors in spoken and written communication

Isolated purpling of gills and blowholes

Is it fatal?

If gone untreated, yes. Brainworm Rot has proven especially fatal among Wol Cabbashites.

What is the cure?

It can be treated if caught early, through an immunization protocol built around antigen clyrossa-themin in bacta suspension.

Successful Engine Tests Cause Sienar Stock Surge

LOLA CURICH, LIANNA - Republic Sienar Systems announced their endorsement and adoption of the Sienar Advanced Systems' twin ion engine design early this morning, clearing the way for mass production and purchase by governing bodies within the worlds of the Republic.

"Never before has such a radical approach to engine design passed all of our safety and performance requirements in its initial evaluation," said an enthusiastic Etab Lapha, Quality Assurance Investigator for RSS. "It's hard to believe that this is a first-generation product."

News of the approval gave Santhe/Sienar Technologies (SST) stock an immediate 27.58 credit (14%) gain. The office of Lady Valles Santhe indicated that the company president was "pleased" with the day's results.

The new twin ion engine technology (dubbed "SIE-TIE"), which utilizes microparticle accelerators to agitate ionized gasses to relativistic velocities, features independently articulated ion stream deflector manifolds for pinpoint maneuvering accuracy, and supplements power yields through a set of solar gather panels, is the brainchild of engineer Raith Sienar. The wealthy and unorthodox inventor is believed to have increased his net worth by another 640 million credits with today's stock increase.

While RSS gave no specific details on incorporation of the twin ion engine in to their existing line of starships, reports indicate that power-yield compatibility issues with current hyperdrive, life-support and shielding technologies may prove prohibitive.

Kabal Riots Quelled by Separatists; 4 Jedi Among the Dead

SHORIBUS, KABAL - The deadly riots that have filled the streets of Shoribus were quelled earlier this week when freighters from Separatist worlds arrived at Kabal and airdropped food parcels to the hungry populace.

Damage and casualty figures from the month-long rioting have yet to be tallied, though the Jedi envoy dispatched to Kabal has been confirmed among the dead. Graphic holos depicting the bodies of Jedi Knights Plessus Ghon, Ixian Rovieda, Nygreena Clo and Padawan Renxis Dielle have been confirmed as authentic by the Jedi Council.

The five mid-sized transport ships hovered aloft on repulsorlifts over the city for over an hour, distributing its cargo along carefully delineated flight paths. The transports' markings indicated Sluis Van as their port of origin.

As the freighters traversed the airspace over Shoribus, their hull-mounted loudhailers voiced anti-Republic propaganda in both Basic and Kabalian. "This salvation comes to you from Count Dooku. He will help you where the Republic has failed," was one of the messages broadcast.

The riots in Kabal started after two months of going without food shipments. Increased Republic taxation of the Sharlissian Trade Corridor made the route cost-prohibitive for Trade Federation food delivery. The Kabal central government attempted to regain control, declaring martial law on Shoribus, but the riots continued. The Kabal Central Citadel sustained firebombing damage, and the Kabalian leader, Premiere Jan Dovu is believed among the dead.

Four weeks before the Battle Of Geonosis

HOLONET NEWS

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Mid Rim Worlds Open Ports to Refugees

Naboo, Monastery, Cerea and Kalarba Ease Immigration Restrictions

THEED, NABOO - The displaced citizenry of the Separatist crisis have newfound options today as a coalition of 10 worlds in the Mid Rim have loosened immigration restrictions to allow refugee resettlement.

"Our world is generous with uninhabited lands that we are willing to share in this time of upheaval," said Queen Jamillia, elected sovereign of Naboo.

"Together, the Naboo and the Gungans will open Naboo's plentiful spaces as a new home for those in need." To that end, Naboo has designated a number of slips in their ports of Theed, Oxon and Kwilaan as refugee arrival stations, even at the expense of moving commercial mining ventures to limited service ports.

The Refugee Resettlement Coalition (see below) was set up a month ago, under the direction of the Refugee Relief Movement, to discuss possible options in relocating displaced citizenry. What began as a coalition of 25 worlds was reduced to 10 as strategies for increased immigration were debated.

The bare minimum requirement for ingress to the worlds of the Coalition is proof of citizenship from a seceded world. Specific planets may have cultural, environmental or biological requirements of prospective immigrants, and travelers are advised to consult with the Bureau of Ships and Services for the latest planetary updates.

Naboo and Cerea, for instance, will not allow the import of heavy machinery or vehicles, instead opting to only take in people. The ringed world of Monastery requires all citizenry to convert to the Order of the Sacred Circle and is confiscating any weaponry brought into the system.

"We applaud the spirit of openness that this coalition embodies. As other worlds turn their back on the problem, these planets have instead embraced the people of the Republic with open arms," said Refugee Relief Movement spokesbeing Kaysil Verwood.

A New Hope for Refugees : The following worlds of the Mid-Rim have loosened immigration restrictions to allow the resettlement of refugees. Their current populations, drawn from official census records, are also listed.

1. Naboo	625 million
2. Monastery	35 million
3. Kalarba	750 million
4. Cerea	450 million
5. Sneeve	1.1 billion
6. Bimmisaari	20 million
7. Durkteel	3.2 billion
8. Ord Tessebok	2.5 billion
9. Garos IV	22 million
10. Ord Varee	3.1 billion

Abrion Sector Secedes; Separatists Get Agri-Worlds

SASHASA, UKIO - In an alarming development that pushes the Separatist movement closer to self-sufficiency, the agriculturally rich worlds of the Abrion sector have withdrawn from the Republic.

"The ag-producers of the Abrion have lived for decades with few options and limited control of the goods we provide. Now, though, we've found appreciative markets without the restrictive bureaucracy of the Republic," explained Senator Esu Rotsino (Abrion Major) as she tendered her Articles of Secession in today's Senate session.

The bountiful Abrion sector is home to over 200 agri-worlds, including the planet Ukio, a world that provided a sizable percentage of the Core World's food shipments last year.

"Many of the worlds that we service, our neighbors, have already seceded," said Ukian Overliege Topas dosLa. "It is most prudent for us to continue serving them as best as possible. Furthermore, removed from the burden of Republic tariffs and bureaucracy, we will actually see a rise in efficiency and, eventually, profits for our farmers."

In response, the Senate is currently debating the approval of emergency subsidy packages that would benefit the remaining Republic food producing sectors.

"Without the breadbasket of the Republic, the Core Worlds would starve," stressed Senator Lexi Dio (Uyter). "We need the heart of the galaxy to be strong, and we need the grains of the Colonies and Rim Worlds to strengthen us."

Circus Horrificus Turns Horrific

KO HENTOTA, NAR SHADDAA - An illegal performance by the underground Circus Horrificus ended in chaos yesterday in the lower levels of Nar Shaddaa as a new, exotic beast showcased by the traveling troupe escaped and ran amuck. While performing within an immense ventilation nexus beneath the district of Ko Hentota, the Circus Horrificus revealed an agitated arqet, a creature native to Pellastrallus, to an appreciative crowd. Cheers of joy quickly became shrieks of terror as the arqet escaped its bonds and gored 12 audience members. Attempts to stun the beast proved fruitless, and the arqet fled into the ventilation grid. At least five other deaths have been attributed to the escaped creature, but since many of the lower levels have never been explored, it is impossible to determine the extent of the damage. The surviving members of the Circus have fled. Nar Shaddaa authorities are not expected to pursue.

Greyscale Proposes Gambling as Revenue

SENATE ROTUNDA, CORUSCANT - Senator Simon Greyscale (Vorzyd) drew criticism with his motion to collect Republic tax revenue through government-subsidized casinos in his sector.

"The casinos of Vorzyd generate billions of credits of profit, and right now, these monies are just being pocketed by private interests," said Greyscale. "I should know; I own many of them. The business model works. I say, make it work for us."

Greyscale's bill would call for Republic capital investment in new casinos throughout his sectors, in return for the majority of the profits made by the gambling establishments.

While the galactic leisure industry continues to suffer record losses in this period of instability, casinos are, on average, continuing to generate profits.

"The Republic's uncertain future is cutting into what consumers would consider frivolous spending -- things like trips and vacations at resorts," says Tanda Marelle, senior correspondent for *Galactic Resorts* newsnet. "Conversely, they don't have faith in the economy and don't see much to lose spending at a casino. Why put your money in a bank that might not be part of the Republic tomorrow?"

"The Republic was not built on scavenging from vice. This will hurt our people, not help them," argued Senator Bail Organa (Alderaan). "The Senator from Vorzyd is offering a social blight disguised as a panacea."

"The Senator from Alderaan is offering double standard in return," countered Greyscale. "If I recall, I believe his world's government taxes exports of Alderaanian brandy and wine, as well as t'bac products grown on his planet's grasslands. Alderaan believes its citizenry responsible enough to handle those products. I believe my citizenry to be just as responsible."

Senator Greyscale went on to note a percentage of his casino profits goes to gambling addiction relief programs, something that he assured would continue should the government back gambling in his sector.

"I am all for it," said Senator Orn Free Taa (Ryloth). "We can't mollycoddle our

people from making their own decisions. People can choose to gamble or not. The way I see it, it's a voluntary tax for the stupid."

SBI Officer Warns of Conspiracy

GALACTIC CITY, CORUSCANT - "Someone in the Republic government is going to great lengths to hide something," alleged Senior Senate Bureau of Intelligence official Vyn Narcassan in a regular media briefing.

During the course of increased surveillance of anti-Republic factions, Narcassan claims to have uncovered a communications channel that directly bypassed "even the most highly classified detection procedures." The decorated SBI officer asserts that the connected remote node self-destructed at the first sign of a trace, destroying any evidence of the unauthorized conduit.

When asked how unusual such a find may be, Narcassan replied, "Not even the Supreme Chancellor could order a line that silent. Someone on Coruscant has something to hide -- and not your day-to-day bribery and adultery."

While the Chancellor's office characterized the find as "gravely disturbing, if true," Senator Ronet Coorr (Iseno) remained highly skeptical. "Is Narcassan deliberately trying to end his Intelligence career? He's chasing a phantom."

Palpatine Health Rumors Denied

CORE NODE - Supreme Chancellor Palpatine is in great health, and has no plans to take an extended vacation prior to the Military Creation Act vote, said one the Chancellor's closest aides today. Sate Pestage, personal advisor to Palpatine, addressed the latest rumors regarding the Chancellor's health. "If he looks tired, it's because holding the Republic together is a tiring job. He's working day and night to deal with the Separatist issue, but his health is up to it. He has the energy of a man half his age," said Pestage.

Baby Ludi Moved to Kamparas

JEDI TEMPLE, CORUSCANT - Amidst a flurry of controversy and popular activism, the Jedi Council has transported young Baby Ludi from the Jedi Temple on Coruscant to the training academy on distant Kamparas.

The fourteen-month old child is the subject of a heated custody dispute between her mother, Jonava Billane, and the Jedi Council, who refuse to hand over the child since she has begun her Jedi training.

Sometime last night, a Jedi transport vessel took the child -- known to the Jedi by her adopted name of Aris-Del Wari -- as well as a class or "clan" of 19 other Jedi children off Coruscant.

Upon learning this, members of the People's Inquest, a citizen's Jedi watchgroup that has had members camped outside the Temple for months, launched into an impromptu rally. "What have you to hide?" asked acting leader Firris Palbert through a loudhailer, drawing cheers from the assembled group. "Are the vaunted Masters so afraid of us that they must flee with a child they know they have no claim to?"

Though the Jedi Council refused comment on record regarding the transfer, members of the Judiciary did address the move. "This transfer is part of standard syllabi," said Judicial Cerisa Vosengoor. "The initiate clan is undergoing specialized learning at Kamparas by Masters of varied techniques. The implication that any external pressure prompted the move is spurious," Palbert continued to rouse his audience, loudly suggesting that all supporters of the People's Inquest with the necessary funds should travel to Kamparas to continue the protest there.

The Inquest's founder and president, Thrynka Padaunete was not available for comment. Padaunete and Jonava Billane are currently on Kassido reviewing casting auditions for the as-yet untitled Baby Ludi holofeature.

3 weeks before the Battle Of Geonosis

HOLONET NEWS

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Would-Be Saboteur Captured

Jedi Apprehend Attempted Terrorist

YAG'DHUL EMBASSY, CORUSCANT - The vigilance of a civilian Givin worker and the swift response of two of the most renowned Jedi Masters averted disaster today, as a would-be saboteur was apprehended at the Yag'dhul Ambassadorial Landing Platform.

Gavrilonnis Tejere, a 22-year old Givin maintenance worker, was spotted by co-worker Jujiran Halbeet working on the repulsor assembly that kept the landing platform aloft.

"I thought it odd, since the maintenance of such systems was not among his assigned variables," said Halbeet. "I processed it several times, but kept coming up with an irrational remainder, so I queried him. That's when he fired."

Tejere drew a blaster pistol and fired, injuring Halbeet, and sending the wounded co-worker reeling off the platform, tumbling into open air. It was at that exact moment that an air taxi ferrying Jedi Masters Yoda and Mace Windu entered the area. Using their supernatural abilities, the Jedi were able to save Halbeet, and safely deposit him on an adjacent rooftop. The Jedi were returning from a meeting in the neighboring Ansion Embassy when they noticed the disturbance. Security holocams recorded the subsequent confrontation as the two Jedi directed their vehicle to the surface of the platform.

"Put the weapon down," Master Windu commanded. Tejere fired two shots, the first going wide the second harmlessly deflected into the landing pad by Windu's laser sword.

When Tejere attempted to fire a third time, his weapon flew from his hand, toward the Jedi. Master Yoda caught the weapon, and Master Windu strode toward the now unarmed assailant. Though holo-records are sketchy due to their angle of recording, it appears Windu knocked Tejere unconscious through pressure applied to his clavicle.

The saboteur was taken into custody to the nearest Judiciary processing station where he was questioned. The Judicial Department has yet to reveal the details of the questioning, though Master Yoda offered a brief summary. "No connection to Separatists, had he. A lone agitator, he was. Investigate this matter further, we shall."

The Yag'dhul Ambassadorial Landing Platform has been closed down as Judicial representatives continue to carefully examine it for further evidence of sabotage. Sources tell HoloNet News that Tejere's sabotage consisted of a programmed malfunction of the primary repulsor modulator of the platform. Had the program executed, it would have crippled the platform, bringing the entire structure crashing down below.

Givin representatives are upset over this current development. Senator Daggibus Scoritoles sent the following holographic missive from the Givin

Senatorial Tesseract on Yag'dhul. "That one of our own species-set could act against his fellows is incomputable. We are in agreement with findings that this was the act of a lone integer. We have faith in the Judiciary to find an answer, no matter how asymptotic the course may be."

Despite assurances from the Judiciary and the Jedi that Tejere was not part of the organized Separatist movement, the Senate Bureau of Intelligence is taking threats against Coruscant seriously. "From our viewpoint, it's irrelevant if he acted alone or was part of an organization. The end result is the same — there is a threat extending even to here, the heart of the Republic, and we will work to eliminate that threat, by any means necessary," said SBI Director Armand Isard.

The investigation into Tejere's activities has been appointed to a special joint taskforce consisting of Judiciary and SBI agents, supervised by Jedi Knight Qu Rhan.

Gotal Standoff Ends Violently Official Freed, Guerillas Killed

SKREEKA, ATZERRI - Despite the best efforts of a Jedi taskforce, the week-long Roshu Sune hostage standoff ended in violence, resulting in the death of 12 hostages, five guerillas, and two Jedi. The guerilla's intended prisoner, Gotal Emissary Nathanjo Nirrelz has been freed.

The taskforce, led by Sarrissa Jeng, had been engaged in negotiations with the Gotal guerillas, who last week hijacked a commuter hopper with 25 passengers aboard, including Emissary Nirrelz. The hopper was set down in the swamps outside of Skreeka, where the guerillas had a temporary base.

The negotiations were suddenly cut short when blaster fire erupted from the surrounding swamps. Though reports are incomplete, the hijackers within the hopper apparently panicked and began opening fire on their captives.

Though two Jedi -- Antyard-Wo Shissan and Kaloer Cofi -- were killed in the crossfire, the remaining four Jedi including Jeng stormed the hopper. In the tight confines of the passenger compartment, they were forced to kill the guerillas before any more harm could befall the hostages.

During the fight inside the hopper, one of the guerillas set off a thermite gel bomb which ignited the vessel. The Jedi were able to rescue those aboard.

Most have since been taken to medical wards in Skreeka or Talos, suffering from burns or smoke inhalation.

"It's a miracle anyone survived this at all," said Palhra Wavren, one of the passengers who is currently recovering in Talos Port Medicomplex. "Once we heard shots from the outside, we thought it was all over. The rest is just a blur. There was a lot of shouting and shooting, and we heard the laser swords. The next thing I knew, everything went up in smoke and fire and then went black. I woke up out in the swamps being tended to by a Jedi."

Not everyone is praising the Jedi; Gotal Foreign Affairs Commune leader Shagrad Loset criticized the Jedi involvement in the crisis. "We specifically asked the Jedi stay out of this, since we were confident we could handle this. It's a Gotal issue, best handled by Gotal. Unfortunately, they meddled and we can now see the results of lightsaber diplomacy."

Representatives from the Jedi Council continue to stress that every effort was taken to resolve the matter peacefully. "Those rogue elements who fired from afar were never part of our plan. Our intent was to settle this with words. The Jedi Council condemns the actions of those who would take justice into their own hands through violence, and we commend the Jedi task force on their heroic efforts," said Jedi Master Shaak Ti from the Jedi Temple on Coruscant. Sarrissa Jeng and her remaining task force took their dead to the nearest Jedi chapter house on Aleen. They were not available for comment.

Three-Way Hunt Ends with Two Dead

JUDICIAL ARCOLOGY, CORUSCANT - Sent to capture a fugitive alive, Jedi Knight Reeft returned with two dead bodies: his prey and another hunter of his prey. Rotar Lopani, a thief with ties to Bando Gora, fled Coruscant a month ago allegedly with sensitive diplomatic datapads. Circarpous representatives turned to the Jedi for resolution on the matter, but also filed an 8000-credit reward with the Bounty Hunter's Guild.

In a crowded market on Brentaal IV, witnesses report Jedi Reeft was following close behind the disguised suspect when Xexto bounty hunter Tosinqas fell from several stories above, crashing down on the Lopani and killing him. Startled by the sound of Reeft's igniting lightsaber, Tosinqas charged the Jedi halving himself on the drawn weapon.

Guildmaster Cradosk, head of the Bounty Hunter's Guild, called the incident

unacceptable. "We're receiving more and more work from recognized governments within the Republic," he said. "We need better communication and access with the Jedi Temple to give everyone a clearer line of jurisdiction."

The Jedi Temple declined to comment.

Tynna to Secede Following Building Disappearance

LUTRIS, TYNNA - An empty hole and a cloud of soot is all that remains where the Tynna Central Government Building stood only two hours earlier. Early investigation suggests the destruction is consistent with recent phenomenon being blamed on so-called stone mite creatures.

General Council Assistant Zobyteeg was the first to alert security. "I looked up from my research and found myself looking at Lutris Lake," he recalled, "and I don't have a window. My whole wall was gone by the time I could tell anyone." Razelfiin, selected planetary leader by lottery just two months ago, was furious following the building's evacuation. "This is obviously an act of terrorism. What did the Republic do to stop this? Where are our Jedi?" she said. "That's it for Tynna. I'll be contacting Count Dooku once we can establish new government headquarters somewhere."

Senator Aak Officially Appointed

SENATE ROTUNDA, CORUSCANT - Ask Aak was officially recognized as Senator of Malastare, a position he has been filling since the 4:4th assassination of Senator Aks Moe on Aargau. The recognition started today's session of the Galactic Senate.

"My esteemed predecessor had a great love for the Republic," said Aak. "Were it not for this government, Malastare would not enjoy the prosperity that it does today. I look forward to continuing the effort to preserve this proud institution, and assisting the Supreme Chancellor in whatever manner I can."

Outside the Senate Rotunda, a small but vocal contingent of Dug activists took this opportunity to protest what they call "continued injustices on Malastare." The Dugs-for-Democracy movement has been calling for recognition by the Gran government for the past seven standard years.

"We call on all spaceworthy Dugs to gather on Coruscant and protest the continued abuse of our people," said DFD leader Toronaxx. "Aak is no different.

He's got Dug slaves just as Moe did."

Though Aak was unavailable for comment regarding Toronaxx's statements, Representative Baskol Yeesrim did field the accusation. "The Dugs in the employ of the Gran Protectorate are paid workers enjoying substantial benefits. Though, it doesn't surprise me to hear the liberal media taking such an anti-Gran slant."

2 weeks before the Battle Of Geonosis

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Dooku Spotted in Gree Enclave

Reports Place Separatist Leader in Obscure Region

SATIKAN, ASATION - The Senate Bureau of Intelligence has confirmed sporadic reports that Count Dooku, popular leader of the Separatist movement, was spotted earlier in the week in a remote area of the Outer Rim known as the Gree Enclave.

"Analysis of intelligence gathered on the Gree worlds of Asation and Lonatro corroborates eyewitness accounts of Count Dooku's presence there. His intent was unknown, as is his current whereabouts," SBI Director Armand Isard told the media today during a mid-afternoon conference on Coruscant.

Reports first reached the SBI at the start of the week that a man fitting Count Dooku's description was spotted aboard the Rokak'k Baran, a mobile transport station that travels the worlds of the Enclave. A trader in the area forwarded the report to the nearest Judiciary office on Trassitan.

By the time the Judiciary dispatched a sensor probe droid, Dooku had apparently left, spending approximately four days in the area. The probe has gathered data of what is believed to be his departure, though the sensor logs are heavily distorted, possibly affected in as-yet-unknown means by Dooku.

"We were unable to get a clear image of whatever he was flying in before he jumped to lightspeed. The vessel's particle-wake is unlike any we've ever encountered, and we are currently in contact with Gree crafters to see if they may be able to shed some light on this," continued Isard.

The Director would not comment on whether the particle trail constituted evidence of a radical propulsion system or an exotic weapon.

The Gree Enclave is a private state of less-than-a-dozen worlds inhabited by the Gree, a laconic species of cephalopods said to have built a civilization that predates the Republic. The worlds of the Gree are a xenoarcheologist's treasure trove, harboring artifacts of exotic and advanced technology carefully guarded by the Gree, who have since degenerated to a point where the relics are largely unusable.

An investigation task force of Jedi are being dispatched to the distant region from the Jedi Temple on Coruscant. Jedi Masters Ashka Boda and Jabidus Inspra are leading a team of five Jedi into the Enclave to determine the purpose of Dooku's visit.

Isard would not comment on what exactly he believed Dooku was doing in the Enclave. "I am not at liberty to offer conjecture at this point," he said. Since the area has traditionally had no interests in galactic affairs, it is unlikely that the distant Enclave will become a hotbed of Separatist activity. "The Enclave is of limited political value. It is doubtful that Dooku was dispensing his rhetoric there," said Isard.

"Prior to his disappearance ten years ago, Master Dooku was known to have a passion for antiquities and exotic forms of technology," says noted Jedi Scholar Bashinan Hodizwen. "His presence there may have been something as innocuous as a shopping trip for curios."

The Jedi Council has refused comment on the story, sticking to their usual stance that Dooku is not a part of the more violent uprisings sparked by the Separatist movement. Previous statements by the Council have attributed the scattered flashpoints as the work of opportunists using Dooku's name to their own ends.

Special Feature: Who is Count Dooku?

Once a Jedi Master of great repute, Dooku's departure from the Jedi order made newsnet headlines across the galaxy. He is the most recent of the so-called "Lost Twenty," the only Jedi in the history of the order to voluntarily renounce their commissions.

Citing disillusionment with the Republic and the Council, Dooku left Coruscant for his homeworld of Serenno. There, he took up his title and wealth that was his birthright and disappeared for years.

His departure was a magnification of his long-standing tradition of independence, an unusual trait in the Jedi order. Dooku was a strong proponent of the living Force, a school of Jedi thought with more emphasis on action and instinct rather than the more serene and contemplative paths espoused by proponents of the unifying Force. This proactive stance dovetailed well into Dooku's new career as a political firebrand.

The former Jedi Master first reappeared on Raxus Prime, complete with fiery rhetoric lambasting the Senate and the Jedi order's complacency in the visible erosion of morals and ideals of the Republic. Since that well documented speech two years ago, Dooku has been spotted on worlds throughout the Outer Rim, fomenting secession and leading a popular movement that soon developed an alarming cohesion.

Dooku's base of operations is believed to be mobile. Reports of his speeches are scattered and often contradictory. Propaganda bearing his name has flooded the HoloNet, though many of these messages are believed to be forgeries.

Alarmist and reactionary Separatists have spilled blood in the Count's name, though the Jedi Council has steadfastly denied any connection between these violent acts and Dooku's agenda. "Dooku was a Jedi, and a Jedi's devotion to the Force is for knowledge and defense. He would never order these attacks," Jedi Master Mace Windu was quoted saying after the violence that rocked Antar 4.

Still, why has Dooku gained such a big following? Some of the more paranoid point to his Jedi abilities to warp minds, but even without supernatural talents, he is a charismatic man with a powerful presence. In times of bureaucratic stalemating and lethargic government response to crisis issues, Dooku has appeared as a man of action in a time of inaction. He has publicly derided the Jedi allegiance to what he defines as a corrupt and ineffective government. In an age where heroism is hard to find and so many of the galaxy's trusted institutes are treading carefully and sidestepping important confrontation, it is easy to laud someone who is making waves, regardless of the possible damage such waves may cause.

Compiled by Harris Sanseon with the helpful assistance of Master Dav-Wes Renno and Madame Jocasta Nu of the Jedi Archives.

Vigilante Task Force Departs to Engage Separatists

EXPANSION REGION NODE - A Republic cruiser assigned to the Judicial Department has defected from the Republic to begin its own private battle against Separatist forces, Republic Judicial Terrinald Screed confirmed today.

The *Scarlet Thranta*, a mid-sized corvette with a crew of 150, ceased communications on a routine patrol mission near Sluissi space last week. What was first believed to be a mechanical failure was later confirmed to be mutiny from Republic service initiated by the vessel's captain Zozridor Slayke.

"Our loyalty is only overshadowed by our frustration with the Republic's inactivity. Those aboard this vessel are children of the Republic and freedom's sons and daughters. We will fight to preserve this union, even if the Senate is afraid to defend itself," said Slayke's final transmission to the Judicial Department, which was intercepted and broadcast by news program *Essence* earlier this week.

"Those in our service pride ourselves on loyalty and discipline, and the private actions of Captain Slayke are uniformly condemned by our office and the Republic," said Screed. "To the worlds of the Sluis sector, understand that whatever campaigns they initiate in your territory are wholly disapproved. We will not be dragged into war by the acts of radicals, regardless of their intentions."

Jedi Settle Ansion Dispute

CUIPERNAM, ANSION - Despite a swath of scattered violence leading all the way into the very halls of the Unity of Community, the Mid Rim world of Ansion voted that it would remain in the Republic.

The vote was contingent on the unlikely completion of a mission by a Jedi delegation to strengthen diplomatic ties between city-dwelling Ansionians and the people of the plains. Upon the delegation's return to Cuipernam, it was met with scattered attacks from unknown mercenaries. The Jedi nonetheless delivered word of their success to the Unity, prompting the vote.

An agitator identified as Ogomoor then stormed into the municipal hall. Before he could brandish what was thought to be a weapon, Ogomoor was shot dead

by the heroic marksmanship of legitimate businessman Soerrg Vosadii Bezhin. "Indeed, he was a past associate of mine," Soerrg told reporters after the vote. "He was a being of pronounced and lamentable instabilities whom I hired on occasion to provide the downtrodden soul a sense of purpose and opportunity. It saddens me that his tether to sanity was so atrophied."

The Unity then voted to accept the newly drafted Jedi concordance with a margin of 9-2. The new agreement would see strengthened diplomatic relations between the Alwari nomads and the cities of Ansion, with the Alwari sharing dominion over half of the prairie lands.

In addition to this profound development, the Jedi envoy -- led by Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi and Jedi Master Luminara Unduli -- somehow also settled a long-standing dispute between the Borokii and the Januul clans.

The vote staved off an attempted secession by disenfranchised elements of Ansion. Through a convoluted chain of alliances, such as the Malarian Alliance and the Keitumite Mutual Military Treaty, Ansion's secession would have also taken a number of key Mid Rim worlds.

Not all the actions of the Jedi delegation were successful. An impulsive attempt by one of the Jedi's younger Padawan apprentices to arrest Soerrg foundered upon failure to provide evidence of secessionist conspiracy.

"Our offworld friends have clearly been under enormous strain," said the congenial Soerrg. "I take no umbrage at the child's outburst. I can only imagine the deprivations she and her companions have been forced to suffer these past weeks out on the empty prairie."

As testament to his dedication to Ansion, Soerrg is spearheading the investigation into who funded the unknown pro-secessionist mercenaries that attempted to disrupt today's vote.

Yag'Dhul Secedes

DODECAPOLIS, YAG'DHUL - As is becoming increasingly common during these turbulent times, the Republic was dealt a major blow with the formal secession of Yag'Dhul and its domains today. Yag'Dhul, a very prosperous world, takes with it valuable technological, scientific and mineral resources from the Republic to the Separatists.

Senator Daggibus Scoritoles transmitted Articles of Secession via HoloNet to the Senate this morning, making the separation official. The statement was also simulcast along the broadcast towers of Yag'Dhul's largest civic shelters. The transmission was accompanied by numerous charts and graphs as explanation of the action.

"It is not without regret that the Body Calculus and the collected domain and range of the Givin people have decided to leave the larger Republic. But the threats of remaining are greater than or equal to the threats of secession," Scoritoles said.

According to the broadcast, the Body Calculus's most revered mathematicians developed working models of the Republic's current political situation. By advancing along the time axis of the model, the resultant figures indicated a bleak future for the Republic and for Yag'Dhul specifically. "The discriminant of the quadratic never lies," added Scoritoles.

"The Loyalist Committee is dismayed by the secession, though we will respect the beliefs of the Givin theocracy," said Bail Organa (Alderaan) at a conference after Senate session today.

Others in the committee weren't as measured with their statements. "Sure, the numbers are dismal if they factored in their own cowardice," said Ask Aak (Malastare). "I'd invoke the Corellian proverbs about odds, but now with even the Corellians hiding their heads, I'm hesitant to do that."

Corellian Jedi Return

CORELLIAN SECTOR NODE - Reinforcing their pledge to protect the Republic, two-dozen Jedi from the Corellian sector returned to the Jedi Temple after a careful review of their homeworlds' security. Following Corellia's closing of borders on 3:14, many insiders and Jedi observers were uncertain as to the status of the Jedi Knights operating in the sector. Their return is a welcome one to the already beleaguered order. "Our commitment is to the Jedi Council and the Republic that it serves, but we are Corellians by blood and will always have a connection to our home," said returning Jedi Knight Nejaa Halcyon.

Jedi Starfighter – Act I

In orbit above Geonosis, Captain Cavik Toth of Sabaoth Squadron is contacted by Count Dooku. Along with the Trade Federation and the Confederacy of Independent Systems, Sabaoth Squadron is developing a weapon called trihexalon in the Karthakk system.

Meanwhile, Jedi Master Adi Gallia is tasked by Mace Windu to meet with and possibly recruit the mercenary Nym, little-known hero of the Battle of Naboo. Gallia uses the mission as an opportunity to test the new Delta-7 *Aethersprite*-class light interceptor—the "Jedi starfighter"—and after a training session with Saesee Tiin above Coruscant, Adi departs in her prototype starfighter to meet with Nym's representative, Reti. Their meeting is interrupted by the arrival of Trade Federation droid starfighters, forcing the two pilots into a battle with them and their C-9979 landing craft. Gallia and Reti prevail—though their actions are witnessed both by a Sabaoth Squadron spy ship and Jango Fett, the latter looking to claim a bounty on Reti's head...

Reti escorts Adi to Maramere, where Nym and his lieutenant Jinkins are attempting to steal codes to an orbital prison from a small island base. Their mission is a success, but only with Adi's help do they defeat the Federation forces deployed to stop them. Nym refuses to hear Gallia out, though he does allow her to join the raid on Spacestation 1138, where members of the Mere Resistance are being held. The codes procured by Jinkins allow Captain Orsai and his men to escape prison, and, with Nym, Gallia and other pilots flying interference, the escapees board the *Liberator* and escape into hyperspace.

With his team bolstered, Nym returns to Maramere to destroy a sensor station that has been tracking his movements over the past decade. The strike force battles past the station's aquatic defenses, and is successful in destroying the facility. However, the Neimoidian Harro Ruuk survives, and launches a desperate attack on Nym's forces from a submersible assault craft. He puts up formidable resistance, but is ultimately overwhelmed and his vessel destroyed—though Ruuk himself ejects, and flees the scene.

Jedi Starfighter – Act II

In orbit over Nod Kartha, Captain Toth, accompanied by Lieutenant Bella, meets with three Neimoidians in charge of the trihexalon project. Toth is displeased by their lack of motivation, and turns their own weapon against them, killing the project leaders and assuming control himself. Meanwhile, Nym and Jinkins launch an attack on a Federation mining facility at Mount Merakan, while Adi, Reti and Sol Sixxa defend Point Modie from Toth's first trihexalon weapon test.

Realizing the threat of this new weapon, Nym and his team make for Nod Kartha, the heavily-defended center of trihexalon production. Upon emerging from hyperspace over the planet, Captain Orsai's cruiser, *Kethor*, is struck by an orbital defense cannon, leaving only the *Tritus* as the team's heavy weapons cruiser. While it and the starfighters battle Vulture droids, Scarab fighters and droid bombers, the *Kethor* sets a collision course with one of the planet's three orbital deflector shield generators. His men evacuate the doomed cruiser, though Orsai himself goes down with his ship as it smashes into the generator, destroying it. At that point, Sabaoth Squadron arrives in the form of several frigates and waves of Sabaoth starfighters. Nym's forces fight back, and are eventually able to destroy the remaining two generators, and make for the surface. However, Jango Fett also joined the battle, and forced Reti into hyperspace, destination unknown.

Two pilots down, the strike team continues undaunted, launching a brave attack on the main trihexalon production facility. Fending off starfighters and Trade Federation frigates, Nym is able to enter the factory and bomb the main reactor, effectively cutting off Toth's supply of Hex weapons. Mission accomplished, the team decides to split: Adi has been ordered to Geonosis, to aid with a large-scale invasion, while Nym intends to take back his base on Lok. The two part on friendly terms, with Nym having finally come to respect the Jedi Master. As Adi departs, Nym's pilots battle the Sabaoth destroyer *Reaver* to a disabled Orbital Defense Cannon over Nod Kartha, intending to assemble it on the moon over Lok.

1 week before the Battle Of Geonosis

HOLONET NEWS

Volume 351. #55. 13:5:09

Anti-War Rally Dispersed by Senate Guard

SENATE ROTUNDA, CORUSCANT - Large scale rioting was narrowly averted today as the Republic's Senate Guard was forced to disperse the growing crowds clustering at the entrances of the Senate Rotunda, provoking further agitation from the assembled protestors. Thirty-eight protestors were arrested, with four of them having to be rushed to hospital, alongside two wounded Senate Guards.

The past two weeks has seen increasing numbers of vocal advocates and opponents of the Military Creation Act, the crucial Republic Army vote that will be decided next week. Citing increased security concerns, the Senate Guard attempted to relocate the crowds, which in turn sparked tense confrontations.

"The blue guards started telling everyone to clear the doors, and then people started shouting back. They [the protestors] tried to push back, and that's when the rifles came out," said eyewitness Lia Reicheds, a Senate clerk who had to weather the crowds to get into work.

The blue robed Senate Guards, brandishing their ceremonial yet effective rifles, fired stun blasts into the crowds, targeting the most aggressive of the activists. Protestors tried to fight back, throwing placards and refuse at the guards. In the rush of the stampeding crowd, four of the stunned activists were crushed.

Two Senate Guards that attempted to extricate the wounded were then attacked with clubs. Lt. Anjavay Rosit and Lt. Troye Mulleshar sustained blunt trauma injuries before their assailants were stunned into submission.

The entire incident spanned over an hour before order was restored. The north landing, which leads to the Rotunda's largest entrance, is now under the watchful eye of 50 Senate Guards and six Jedi Knights.

The majority of the arrested demonstrators were students from the University of Coruscant's Southern Campus, who were there to protest the vote. The remainder of the group has relocated to the smaller, western landing.

"We are a peaceful demonstration," stressed a female Ishi Tib student over a

loud-hailer. "Don't let these warmongers provoke you to lowering yourselves to their level."

"While I regret that it had to turn violent, my guards acted per orders and are to be commended," said Jesra Loture, Captain of the Senate Guard. "We have a responsibility to the representatives of the Republic. We have hundreds of delegates arriving in the coming days, and we have to make sure they are safe, and to do so, we have to clear those entryways."

An estimated 7,000 activists are gathered along the circumference of the Senate grounds, most of them protesting the possibility of a Republic army. A pro-military faction is considerably smaller, but no less committed to voicing their views -- views that have broken out into isolated brawls along the concourse. The Senate Guard has more than tripled security in the past week.

Further crowding the grounds are all manner of fringe activist groups using the opportunity to spread their messages. The People's Inquest has transplanted their makeshift camp from the steps of the Jedi Temple to the Senate plaza alongside a number of alien activist groups, such as the Dugs for Democracy.

"It's a zoo out there," said SBI Director Armand Isard. "We've got thousands of people, here, and that just compounds our security concerns. We are just moving them away from the gates, and not 'rounding up agitators' or 'restricting their rights to assemble or voice their opinions,' despite their more colorful claims."

Arconan Smuggling Cartel Dismantled

TYLCARROS, CONA - The capture of Lojrak Shrag and the apparent death of his lieutenant, Godiban Bakoosta, has cracked apart a lucrative salt smuggling cartel servicing the poor and distant world of Cona, in the Teke Ro system.

Jedi Knights Tassida Judrelle, Quarmall and Stass Allie discovered and penetrated the cartel's inner circle on an unnamed asteroid five parsecs from Cona with the help of information provided by independent traders. They arrested 15 smugglers, including cartel kingpin Lojrak Shrag.

"We are forever grateful to the Jedi Knights for the salvation of our people from the horrible drug that's tearing apart our nests," said Arconan spokesbeing Kimar Walc. "We will now rebuild and we hope to spread the word to all Arconans of the dangers of salt."

Cona had previously been serviced intermittently by the Trade Federation, until the taxation of the outlying trade route priced the shipments beyond the native Arcona's ability to pay. The routes were then picked up by independent operators. Some were licensed by the Trade Federation, though most were not. Cona's primary import is liquid water. The scattered Arcona "Grand Nests" would typically exchange mineral rights for water shipments. It was eventually discovered that simple sodium chloride has a euphoric, addictive effect on Arconan metabolisms, and some operators, led by Lojrak Shrag, began shipping inexpensive salt instead of volume-intensive water.

An independent report to the Senate of the growing salt problem described it as "epidemic," prompting a Jedi task force to investigate. By pooling intelligence resources with the more scrupulous of the independent traders, the Jedi were able to infiltrate the smuggling cartel.

An independent operator known only as Billey, who was influential in helping the Jedi, was named an "honorary legend" by the largest Grand Nest in Tylcarros. "The big shippers like the Trade Fed like to paint us independent types as scum with no morals," he told reporters. "But it wouldn't surprise me one bit if it was the Federation that first salted the water shipments and are getting kickbacks from Shrag and his boys."

IBC Denies Arming Separatists

PHELAR, ERIADU - A detained bulk freighter destined for the Separatist world of Praesitlyn was found to contain a gross of InterGalactic Banking Clan hailfire droids, revealed Eriadu customs agents.

"The independent starship *Tandleroff's Trove* was passing through Phelar port for Sluissi space when it was flagged by the attentive eyes of Eriadu Customs and Immigration. Those agents detained the vessel, and a search revealed 144 of the droids packaged amidst ag-equipment," said Eriadu's Minister of Security, Brigadier Gideon Tarkin.

Hailfire droids are a model of hoop-wheeled combat automata used exclusively by the Banking Clan's Collections and Securities division. IBC spokesbeings are denying any involvement or knowledge of the intercepted shipment.

"Our transports and commodities are no more immune to piracy than anyone else's," said Communications Officer Lo Vapeet. "What now rests in an Eriadu holding bay are stolen materials that we can finally account for in our ledgers. To

imply that this finding is indicative of some sort of partisanship with the Separatists is folly and akin to suspecting a blaster manufacturer as being complicit in a corner-store robbery."

The crew of the *Tandleroff's Trove* are currently detained in a Phelar processing center and are undergoing questioning. The Republic's Judiciary Department is expected to take over the investigation.

Senator Farr Named to Loyalist Committee

GALACTIC CITY, CORUSCANT - A month ago, few would have ever expected to see Senator Onaconda Farr on one of Palpatine's closest committees, so outspoken against the Supreme Chancellor is the Rodian politician. His appointment to the Loyalist Committee was announced this morning; Farr replaces Senator Havriso Looruya (Yir Tangee) who was censured for having Separatist ties.

Speaker of the Senate Mas Amedda announced the appointment this morning, provoking cries of protests from numerous Senators. Farr himself was not in session today, instead attending funeral services for his brother and sister-in-law who died in a tragic housefire on Rodia earlier in the week.

"There are many loyal Senators confused as can be about this appointment," said rotunda analyst Dassid Whateel on the morning talk-show *Amberdawn*, "but you have to realize, regardless of his bluster and Palpatine-bashing, Farr is the perfect image of a loyalist. He hates the Separatists. He loves the Republic. And he's willing to do anything to preserve it."

Farr made headlines last week when he exposed Separatist elements in the very heart of the Republic, and produced evidence that Senator Looruya of the Loyalist Committee was in fact a Separatist sympathizer and supporter. Farr's research, provided to the Senate Bureau of Intelligence, has produced another 12 arrests in the wake of that political bombshell, and the SBI is continues its investigations.

Cadanth Loyalty Uncertain After Jedi Death

SASKAPEG, CADINTH - Following the death of their Jedi watchman, the Mid Rim world of Cadanth is wavering in its loyalty to the Republic. The Cadanth Oligarchy withdrew previous statements of support when a pro-Separatist uprising in the capital city of Saskapeg resulted in the death of Jedi Knight Bodis-Ker Vitan. The Prime Oligarch Rankwin Fopow has rescinded previous decrees, and now identifies his government as "firmly undecided."

4 days before the Battle Of Geonsis

HOLONET NEWS

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Palpatine Confident in Negotiations

Supreme Chancellor's Address Full of Optimism

GALACTIC CITY, CORUSCANT - In last night's Address to the Republic, Supreme Chancellor Palpatine expressed renewed confidence in a peaceful solution to the Separatist crisis and commitment to negotiation efforts, though his statements reflected an acceptance of a likely yes vote in today's election.

"Regardless of the outcome of the Military Creation Act Vote, the primary path that this administration will adhere to is one of civility and intelligent discourse," said Palpatine. "If the constituents decide that a Grand Army of the Republic is indeed essential to the safety of our citizenry, we will erect a formidable force to assist our Jedi in maintaining the peace, not in starting a war."

"I assure the families of the Republic that hostilities will only be engaged in retaliation or in the protection of Republic soil, or in response to brazen acts of warfare brought on by the Separatists. It is not this office's desire to incite war," the Chancellor reiterated.

"On election day, we will demonstrate the strength of democracy as thousands of delegates make their voices heard in the Senate. It is this cherished freedom we must protect, at all costs. The days and months ahead call for clear, rational thinking. It is only as a last resort that arms will replace words as the means of settling this dispute," he said in conclusion. A full transcript of his address is available on official government channels.

BREAKING NEWS: Amidala Attacked

Senator Believed Dead in Massive Explosion

Naboo Cruiser torn to Shreds

GALACTIC CITY, CORUSCANT - The skies over the Naboo embassy were filled with flames, debris and tragedy when Senator Padmé Amidala's cruiser was destroyed in a massive explosion.

According to satcam footage, as the Naboo cruiser touched down on its hovering multi-lobed landing pad, escorted by three Naboo N-1 starfighters, an

explosion tore through the gleaming silvery craft. Hurling debris destroyed an accompanying fighter. At least seven people were believed killed in the blast. Security and medical workers from the nearby Naboo embassy are rushing to the scene to investigate. It is currently believed that Senator Padmé Amidala is among the dead.

As per safety protocols, the cruiser avoided the more heavily trafficked skyroutes as it flew from orbital space into Galactic City. The explosion does not appear to be the result of malfunction, but rather a deliberate bombing. It is too early to conclusively tell, but the explosion appears to have originated from the cruiser and not the landing platform, suggesting sabotage originating from offworld.

Senator Amidala, 24, was arriving on Coruscant to cast her vote in the Military Creation Act. The leader of the opposition against Republic militarization, Amidala had no shortage of enemies wishing to silence her. More on this tragedy as it develops; paid subscribers to the full-feed edition of HoloNet News will receive round-the-chrono coverage and updates on this developing story.

Senator Padmé Amidala - A Life of Service cut Tragically Short

Born to humble parents in a small mountain village on Naboo, Padmé Naberrie was raised for a life of public service. Like all Naboo, she was instilled with a strong sense of civic duty at a young age, and schooled in both local politics and foreign affairs.

While still a child, young Padmé served in the Refugee Relief Movement's efforts during the Shadda-Bi-Boran exodus. At the age of 8, she joined the Apprentice Legislators, formally announcing her intent to follow a career in politics. She was then appointed Senatorial Advisor, and then became Princess of Theed at age 12.

Padmé earned the title Queen Amidala in a planet-wide election that lasted less than four seconds. A combination of exceptional scores on her education certificate and her conviction of reform following the scandalous reign of King Veruna secured her position.

Amidala came to galactic prominence a decade ago following the blockading of Naboo by the Trade Federation. She helped unite the disparate populaces of

Naboo, including the normally isolationist Gungan natives, into a resistance movement that forcibly overturned the Federation occupation.

Having served to her term limitations, Amidala stepped down as Queen despite an enormously popular following. The people of Naboo would have gladly amended the constitutionally entrenched limitations to keep Amidala serving longer. Though she had every right to retire to a quiet life of family, she accepted the new Queen Jamillia's request to serve as Senator of Naboo. Since the start of the Separatist crisis two years ago, Amidala had been a strong proponent of peace and negotiation. She headed the Campaign against Republic Militarization and traveled throughout the Mid Rim espousing her beliefs of peaceful reconciliation with the disaffected worlds of the Republic.

Senate Speeder Thief Arrested

USCRU DISTRICT, CORUSCANT - Senator Simon Greyshade sure didn't bet on this happening. Thanks to a hyper-accurate tracking device built into the vehicle of speeder-enthusiast Senator Greyshade (Vorzyd), the one-of-a-kind custom flying machine was recovered within 30 minutes of being stolen from a Senatorial Quarters parkway.

"That speeder is one of my most prized possessions," said a visibly shaken Greyshade. "It took my mechanics years to perfect it. It's a gonzo color. I won't rest until I've destroyed the life of the sleemo who took it."

Though the day's earlier events brought extra security to the Senatorial residential tower, staff became distracted by a wayward traffic droid who smashed a window on one of the building's upper floors. Holocams detected a young human male leaping in to the vehicle and tearing away recklessly. Security devices alerted authorities who quickly located the empty speeder parked carefully over 100 kilometers away on Vos Gesal Street.

"A somewhat disoriented youth came out of the nearby Snapping Septoid entertainment facility," said investigating officer Wets Tranoj. "When he saw us looking at the speeder, he began shouting and pushed us away."

Officials learned the man, Reymet Autem, was the 20-year-old son of Senator Greyshade's designated senate security guard, Sagoro Autem. Reymet was placed in custody after admitting to visiting his father at Greyshade's residence earlier that evening.

"I never fully trusted that kid," stated Greyscale. "He was always protective and envious of my speeder."

In another strange twist, the speeder briefly went missing a second time while security forces processed Autem's arrest. It was quickly located back in its designated parkslot at Greyscale's complex. "With high-profile cases involving politicians, rookies can get nervous," explained Tranoj. "Someone obviously got over-anxious and returned the vehicle without filing documentation."

Antitrust Suits Dropped in Light of Separation

EXPANSION REGION NODE - The Judicial Department has cleared over 2,000 pending antitrust suits against the Commerce Guild following the secession of several Mid and Outer Rim sectors that no longer have any coverage by Republic laws.

The suits, some of which have been on the backlogs for over six years, contend that the Commerce Guild has been bullying competitors in its lucrative commodities markets, sometimes even unleashing private droid armies to enforce guild membership.

"These small local companies are in for a shock now that they're no longer protected by Republic laws and trade borders," said Fourth Assistant Attorney General Kevzod Stenir. "Since Republic law holds no sway in their sectors, there's nothing to stop the guilds and Federation from taking charge."

As an example, Stenir cited the gas giant of Tyed Kant, whose private coalition of food growers had long opposed Commerce Guild membership in favor of managing their own affairs. "With the secession of its governing worlds, Tyed Kant was promptly invaded by the Commerce Guild and forced to sign a treaty," said Stenir.

Commerce Guild President Shu Mai denied any orchestrated plans to take over private ventures in Separatist territories. "The Attorney General is being a tad dramatic in his recollection of the Tyed Kant investment. That was a move to ensure that such valuable food commodities stay within the trade-flow of the Republic and not fall into Separatist hands," she said. "Understand that we are examining each market secession on a case by case basis. These losses are hitting us as hard as anyone, I assure you."

Jedi Starfighters Moved to Eriadu Base

PHELAR, ERIADU - The Jedi Council has moved a squadron of a dozen Delta-7 Aethersprite starfighters to the busy Phelar Port of Eriadu, bolstering Republic security in the Seswenna sector which now borders a sizable Separatist front. The sleek wedge-shaped starfighters have been stationed at the Eriadu Planetary Security Launchport complex. "The Jedi order has the full support and cooperation of Eriadu and the Seswenna sector," said Brigadier Gideon Tarkin in a ceremony that welcomed the fighters to the base. Tarkin then joined Jedi Master Hyris-Well Madorin to discuss increased security measures for the Rimma Trade Route.

Lahara Patrol Attacked, Jedi to Send Aid

OUTER RIM NODE - Separatist extremists opened fire on a Space Rescue Corp patrol cutter on the borders of the Lahara sector yesterday, prompting an emergency Jedi taskforce to be dispatched to the area.

The *Iron Tether* was strafed by a quartet of Subpro C-73 Tracker starfighters backed by a modified Corellian freighter despite transmitting its identifying telesponder signal and flying its recognizable red and black hull colors.

"When the engagement began, there may have been the off-chance the Separatists didn't recognize the vessel as a Rescue Corp ship," said Corps Director Rowen Foce, "but once they closed to attack, there's no way they could have missed the markings. An attack on an unarmed rescue ship is nothing short of barbaric."

The *Tether* was on a routine patrol mission of a dense nebulosity known as the Cowl Crucible, a deep space phenomena that straddles the Lahara and Oricho sector borders. Ships often suffer unexpected hyperspace reversions by passing too close to the Crucible, becoming stranded and in need of aid.

As the *Tether* continued its survey, it traveled closer to the Lahara sector border, an area of space that has since seceded from the Republic. Apparently without warning, the Separatist vessels attacked the *Tether*.

"The cutter had its shields overloaded and sustained damage to its hull and hyperdrive. To hinder pursuit, its captain was forced to take cover within the Crucible. Because of the damage to the shielding, the crew was exposed to dangerous levels of radiation while in hiding. Thankfully, no one was killed by the exposure, but the crew is currently undergoing antirad treatment," Foce told

reporters today.

A taskforce led by Jedi Master Darrin Arkanian has been dispatched to the distant Oricho sector to patrol the border and offer security to travelers on the Republic-side of the border.

**BREAKING NEWS: Amidala Alive
Determined Senator Addresses Senate
Military Creation Act Vote Delayed**

In an unparalleled display of devotion to service, Senator Padmé Amidala, believed killed in a terrorist strike this morning, emerged alive and well in time for the day's Military Creation Act vote, though the Vote was postponed pending security reviews.

Amidala made her dramatic entrance in the middle of words of mourning by Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, who delayed the vote to grieve the Senator's demise.

"Her death is a great loss to us all," the Supreme Chancellor said. "We will all mourn her as a relentless champion of freedom. And as a dear friend."

The Senate then broke into partisan bickering as the vote was motioned to be to be deferred by Senator Orn Free Taa (Ryloth). The arguments subsided into gasps of surprise as Senator Amidala interrupted the fray with strong words of protest against the Military Creation Act.

"An assassination attempt was made upon my life," the Senator said. "One of my bodyguards and six others were ruthlessly and senselessly murdered. I was the target, but more importantly, the security measure before you was the target. I have led the opposition to building this army, and someone will stop at nothing to assure its passage."

The Senate vote, which was to be completed within the 0800 hour, was instead deferred to a later session sometime tomorrow. Pro-military Senators have wasted no time accusing Supreme Chancellor Palpatine of overstepping his authority in stalling the vote.

"Palpatine has never been behind the Military Creation Act, and was ready to stall it when the leader of the opposition appeared to be dead," said Senator

Candabrine Bu (Lansono). "Would he have done so if it was a pro-military Senator who was killed? And when she showed up alive, he postpones the vote anyway. I seriously doubt whether he had intended for the vote to pass today at all."

Prior to the session's adjournment, Amidala cautioned about the consequences of the Military Creation Act. "Wake up, Senators! You must wake up! If you offer the Separatists violence, they can only show violence in return. Many will lose their lives, all will lose their freedoms. I pray you do not let fear push you into disaster. Vote down this security measure, which is nothing less than a declaration of war. Does anyone here want that? I cannot believe they do."

Anakin: Apprentice

Anakin Skywalker connected the last two wires. He snapped the control panel back into place. Then he flipped the switch.

The droid staggered to its feet, eyes flashing. Anakin smiled. Then came a shrill beep. The panel suddenly sprang open and the motivator popped out!

The droid's eyes went dark and it toppled over.

"Shouldn't you be meditating?"

Anakin looked up. His Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, stood in the doorway.

"I tried to meditate, but I couldn't," Anakin said.

"Meditation does not come easily," Obi-Wan replied. "It takes practice."

Anakin sighed. "Life just seems so much simpler when I'm fixing things."

Obi-Wan glanced at the motionless droid. "So that droid is *fixed*?"

"Well, not yet," Anakin said sheepishly. They both laughed.

"You really should take time to meditate and focus your energy," Obi-Wan said, serious now. "We have a mission."

Anakin brightened. "A mission?"

"Do you remember Queen Amidala of Naboo?"

"Padmé!" the young Padawan said, excited now. "She's on Coruscant?"

"She's a Senator now. She has just arrived," Obi-Wan replied.

He placed his hand on Anakin's shoulder.

"Gather your equipment and prepare yourself," he said. "I'll be back for you in an hour. Senator Amidala is in danger. She needs our help."

"I'll be ready," Anakin promised.


Obi-Wan smiled. "I know," he said.

The Jedi Knight departed and Anakin began to collect his things. He would need his lightsaber and utility belt, his comlink and . . .

Anakin tried to concentrate on his list, but he couldn't stop thinking about Padmé.

He bumped into his desk, and his journal, where he kept his droid designs, fell to the floor. When Anakin stooped to pick it up, he saw a drawing of Padmé he'd made many years before.

I wonder if you've changed over these past ten years, Anakin thought. I know I have.

YEAR: -22
ENTRY: 1 
It is ten years since I last saw Padmé, but I am going to meet her again at last! The Separatist movement, under the leadership of Count Dooku, wants to leave the Republic. Padmé, who is now a Senator, is coming to the Galactic Senate to vote against creating an Army of the Republic.

A hand settled on Anakin's shoulder, startling him.

"Anakin," Obi-Wan said. "It's time for us to meet Senator Amidala."

Anakin was surprised. Was the hour up already? He had been so lost in the events of the past that he had not noticed.

He closed the journal and grabbed his equipment.

"I'm ready," Anakin said, hurrying to the door.

"Not quite," Obi-Wan replied. He placed Anakin's lightsaber in the Padawan's hand.

"Try not to forget it next time," Obi-Wan said.

"Sorry, Master," Anakin said.

"I've told you before, a Jedi's lightsaber is his most precious possession."

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"I've told you before, a Jedi's lightsaber is his most precious possession."

"Yes, Master."

"This weapon is your life."

"You're right, Master," Anakin said impatiently. "You *have* told me before and I have heard you."

"You've heard me, but do you remember what I said?" Master Obi-Wan replied.

Anakin sighed. "I will remember from now on."

"Perhaps," Obi-Wan said with an eyebrow raised.

Then the Jedi Knight pushed his Padawan to the door.

"Come, Anakin," he said. "The Senator awaits."

Obi-Wan and Anakin flew through the crowded skies of Coruscant, toward Senator Amidala's apartments.

Anakin tingled with excitement. He couldn't wait to see Padmé again.

"The situation is grave," Obi-Wan informed his apprentice. "Assassins tried to

murder Senator Amidala."

"Who would dare?" Anakin demanded.

"We don't know."

"What exactly is our mission?"

"The Jedi Council wants us to protect the Senator," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin nodded. "Then we must find out who is trying to hurt Padmé—I mean, Senator Amidala. We must hunt them down and stop them."

"No, you misunderstand the mission," Obi-Wan corrected. "We are here to *protect* the Senator, not start our own investigation."

"We're only supposed to protect her? Where's the challenge in that?" Anakin exclaimed as they entered the lobby of the apartment building.

"This is not a time to create a challenge for yourself. It is a time to obey your elders."

"We'll see," Anakin whispered as the doors closed and the turbolift began to rise.

ENTRY: 2

Someone is trying to kill Padmé. She has been placed under the protection of Master Obi-Wan Kenobi and me. After ten years, she is more beautiful than ever, but she still thinks of me as a little boy.

3 days before the Battle Of Geonosis

Slyther Bushforb

It would take a devout Givin theoretician a lifetime to calculate just how many stories there are in the multi-leveled city of Coruscant, but Slyther Bushforb will tell you that he's heard them all. A private investigator (or "private dack" as he calls himself), he was a Nuknog with a talent for keeping his snout attuned to the pulse of the streets and the flow of crime. The case that had him seated at Dex's Diner the same day Obi-Wan Kenobi walked in looking for information was one that started like so many, with a woman.

It was a dark night, one that would have undoubtedly been stormy had Coruscant's Weather Control Network permitted it. Not many Nuknogs ever left the filthy swamps of Sump, which is why he knew the dame that walked into his office was trouble with a capital *trill*. She was a sight to behold, all right, with flushed display bulbs and a cold glint in her eye that would either break your heart or freeze it solid. Her name was Vekka Lodik, and she was the personal assistant of Seboca, the Dug actor enjoying some fame from his latest starring vehicle, *Airtaxi Driver*. Between puffs of a slender cigarra, she recounted to him how some palooka was gunning for the matinee idol.

Bushforb and his pal Rednax agreed to meet with her boss at Slyther's favorite ardees joint, Dex's Diner. The meeting went smooth as Ottegan silk, save for Seboca's annoyance when the Dug noticed a "Jedi poodoo" seated in an

adjacent booth. Still, Slyther's smooth-talking put the Dug at ease, and when Seboca left, Slyther had the job.

He began his legwork there, waiting for the Jedi to leave to ask Dex a few questions. The Besalisk was always good for a rumor or two. Dex *had* heard something: a hunt that led Bushforb to other clues. Soon, he was sniffing out a solid lead from an old buddy in the Bounty Hunters Guild, which led to a run-down flat beneath Pom Plaza registered to a Dug named Manoca. Bushforb burst in, only to find Vekka holding a gun on him. She'd been the one out to bump off her boss all along. "Manoca" was just an alias Seboca used to keep a low profile, and when he showed up at his own secret pad, she planned to rub out the Dug, with Bushforb taking the fall. But he was nobody's patsy, not even for a looker like Vekka. She clearly hadn't learned to handle her rod on the mean streets of the underlevels, and when she glanced away, Bushforb got the drop on her. He pulled his own piece and gave her a nasty case of light poisoning.

ENTRY: 3

It seems that a bounty hunter is behind the attacks on Padmé. Obi-Wan is going to track him down. It is my job to escort Padmé back to Naboo and protect her. Obi-Wan does not think I am ready for this assignment, but he never appreciates my skills!

ENTRY: 4

As we travelled in disguise to Naboo, I told Padmé about being a Jedi and how Obi-Wan is holding me back. I think Padmé has begun to see that I am no longer a child.

ENTRY: 5

We are safe on Naboo, and Padmé and I have grown very close. I want to tell her that I am in love with her, but a Jedi is not allowed to love.

ENTRY: 6

I told Padmé how I feel, but she said that our love can never be. I know that she is right. It would destroy us.

ENTRY: 7

Last night I had a terrible nightmare. I think that my mother is in danger! Padmé and I are going to Tatooine, even though I will be disobeying the Jedi Council's orders.

ENTRY: 8

We have arrived on Tatooine. My mother has been captured by Tusken Raiders. I must find her!

YEAR: -22 ○

ENTRY: 1

Master Anakin has returned at last! I can hardly believe it! (I still don't have my outer coverings.) He has brought Miss Padmé with him. He has become a handsome young Jedi, and has learned many things since he left here ten years ago!

I was working outside the Lars homestead, where we have lived since Shmi was sold to Cliegg Lars. He has now freed her and married her, but what a time for Master Anakin to arrive! Shmi has been captured by Tusken Raiders! Master Anakin has gone to hunt for his mother.

ENTRY: 9 ○

I found my mother at the Tusken Raiders camp, but I was too late. She died in my arms. A great rage filled me and I slaughtered the Tusken Raiders – men, women and children. I will never fail again. I will become the most powerful Jedi ever.

○ **ENTRY: 2**

Master Anakin has returned to the Lars homestead with his mother's body. It is a very sad time. He buried her, and he seemed to be filled with grief and anger.

ENTRY: 3

Artoo showed Master Anakin and Miss Padmé a report transmitted from Obi-Wan Kenobi, the Jedi Knight who is teaching Master Anakin. Obi-Wan was attacked halfway through his message! The Jedi Council has ordered Master Anakin not to go looking for Obi-Wan, but Master Anakin was always headstrong.

"I'm going after him!" he cried.

ENTRY: 10

Obi-Wan has found a huge clone army that has been created for the Republic. He also found Jango Fett, the bounty hunter who tried to kill Padmé. He has followed Jango to Geonosis, but now he is in danger. The Jedi Council doesn't want me to go and help Obi-Wan, but I will not listen to them!

ENTRY: 4

Today I left Tatooine for the first time since I was created. I am travelling to a planet called Geonosis with Master Anakin, Artoo and my new owner, Miss Padmé.

When our starfighter landed on Geonosis, Miss Padmé and Master rushed off to find Obi-Wan. Humans are most confusing. One moment they're generating a pleasant mutual attraction and the next, waves of violent hostility. I don't suppose that I will ever understand them.

Precipice

Blue-tongued bolts of lightning coursed through Obi-Wan Kenobi, gathering at his wrists and ankles before racing up and down his body in a journey surely designed to drive him to the edge of reason. He was held largely immobile, like an insect pinned to a cotton display swab, twitching as his muscles spasmed uncontrollably in a futile struggle to escape their torment. It was an odd sort of pain: an aching, prickling, numbness similar to a limb that had fallen asleep combined with the burning of muscles worked to shaky exhaustion. A sheen of cold sweat covered his pale face, the occasional bead of which rolled down his temples before disappearing into his beard.

Green-blue eyes narrowed as he surveyed his surroundings, an enterprise assisted by the fact that he was suspended a meter off the ground by a series of repulsorlifts while being constantly rotated like a nerf on a spit. The crisp, acidic smell of electricity with the faint underpinning of burnt hair wafted through the air of the cavernous chamber. Under other circumstances he might have been impressed by the millions of years of slow geological evolution required to create the red rock structure serving as his prison, but currently it was just one more obstacle between him and freedom.

How long he'd been there, he could not say. Hours certainly. He was exhausted, yet wired, his mind wandering deplorably, unable to concentrate on one thing for more than a few moments at a time.

It was an effective way to secure a Jedi, he had to admit. He could focus neither mind nor body enough to harness the energy of the Force in order to affect an escape. The static electricity emanating from the containment field felt like millions of tiny nimgnats burrowing relentlessly into his flesh. It was excruciating and disturbingly efficient.

The Jedi swallowed hard, wincing at the stale, coppery taste of blood in his mouth. Dwelling on his discomfort would benefit neither himself nor the Force he had dedicated his life to serving. He sighed and tried to center his concentration. Again. Instead all he could think about was clawing the skin from his bones.

As another static-induced tremor lit up Obi-Wan's nervous system, he marveled at the *wonderful* hospitality of the Geonosians. He generally preferred to be welcomed with Corellian whiskey or even tea rather than shock treatment, but every culture had its foibles. He could only hope he was seriously running up their power bill.

He took a deep breath and released his frustration into the Force. He would wait and the Force would present him with the opportune means and time for escape. Anytime now... or now... or perhaps now... Patience was usually a skill that he had in abundance, although his own Master had long despaired that he would ever acquire it.

Qui-Gon Jinn. Dead ten years now. Grief, like the nightmares of his death, had faded in time, but the void in Obi-Wan's life never entirely diminished. Obi-Wan ruthlessly pushed the thought from his mind. Ruminating on his Master's murder was not going to assist him in his objective, which, he reminded himself sternly, was to find a way to center himself and discover a means of escape.

Right. Red walls. Check. Intense pain. Check. No aid from the Force. Check. He wanted to kick a control panel. Or a storage container. Or his astromech. He wondered how R4 was doing. He hoped the Geonosians wouldn't disintegrate her. Had the little droid been able to send his last transmission? As another series of shocks racked his already battered body, he mused that perhaps deciding to report the information gleaned during his covert foray into the Geonosian stronghold before departing the planet was not his most brilliant decision.

Many of his decisions lately had been less than stellar, he admitted, as his mind drifted inwards, unconsciously seeking refuge from the pain, until he bumped rather abruptly into the unease that had been lurking just under the surface of his consciousness since before he left the Jedi Temple on this fact-finding mission.

Someone had erased the planet of Kamino from the Jedi archives. No, not just someone. A Jedi. He had seen the evidence of it himself. His breath caught in his throat as he again considered the implications of that. A Jedi had

apparently contracted with the Kaminoans ten years ago to create a clone army for the Republic, presumably to fight against the Separatists, in whose hidden base of operations he now found himself imprisoned. But a decade ago the Separatists hadn't even existed.

As Obi-Wan considered these facts, fear began to seep into his mind like water into duracrete cracks. The Galactic Republic, which had stood for a thousand years, was moving full speed ahead toward civil war. The Jedi, who had kept the peace for at least that long, were powerless to stop it. And, perhaps most frightening of all, he felt something was terribly wrong with his Padawan, the boy -- now man -- he had trained in the ways of the Jedi for the past ten years. Although he wasn't entirely sure how, his feelings told him that the fates of these three things were intricately linked. Forces were at work here on Geonosis that could destroy everything he held dear.

Anakin Skywalker was not the Padawan that Obi-Wan would have chosen for himself, which was rather ironic since he was fairly confident that his own Master would have said the same of him. But there was no question that he loved his apprentice with a fierceness that often frightened him. Still, training Anakin was a bit like dodging blaster fire, always one step away from disaster. There was no doubt that the boy was one of the most powerful Jedi ever. But the essence of the Jedi was not the power, but rather what one did with it.

A Jedi may feel anger, hate, hurt, despair -- they were, after all, sentient beings -- but a Jedi must never allow these feelings to guide his actions. Such behavior went against the instincts of most species, which was why Jedi younglings began their training so young. The ability to circumvent one's nature and to put unwavering trust in the guidance of the Force was not an easy thing to do. It was a choice that each Jedi had to make every day. Sometimes, every minute. But it was essential. Control was at the core of a Jedi. This was the lesson he feared he had utterly failed to teach Anakin.

His apprentice hadn't been ready for the responsibility of the solo mission to safeguard Senator Amidala. The fact that Anakin had apparently abandoned his mandate and was on Tatooine only served to illustrate that point. When he'd expressed his concerns to Master Yoda and Master Windu, they'd brushed him

off, much to his dismay. It wasn't the first time it had happened. Lately, the Council seemed to think they knew what was best for Anakin. He felt to his bones that they were wrong. And if they were, the consequences could be catastrophic.

Don't center on your anxiety. How many times had his Master said those words to him? More times than there were stars in the galaxy. Even now in the privacy of his own mind he heard them in Qui-Gon's voice. He took a deep breath. Qui-Gon was right. Live in the moment. Focusing on his fears would accomplish nothing.

He wanted to rip the flesh from the back of his skull and stop the insidious itch! He summoned all his energy in an attempt to move his head, hoping for any type of relief, only to discover Count Dooku entering his cell.

"Traitor!" Obi-Wan called as a greeting, the bitter word escaping his lips before he'd had a chance to evaluate the situation. *Damn*, he knew better than that.

Dooku didn't seem all that offended, however. "Oh no, my friend. This is a mistake. A terrible mistake. They've gone too far. This is madness."

The appearance of the elderly human was at odds with the distress in his voice. He looked more like he was on his way to an opera, with his elegant clothing and perfectly groomed beard, than on a mission to assist a "friend" in need.

Irrationally, the fact that not a single hair on the man's gray head was out of place made Obi-Wan want to unleash a Force storm on him.

"I thought you were the leader here, Dooku," the Jedi replied, holding his voice as steady as possible. *Leader*. The thought disgusted him. Dooku had been a Jedi once. Qui-Gon's master! How could he have come to this?

"This had nothing to do with me, I assure you," the Count said, ignoring Obi-Wan's accusation. "I will petition immediately to have you set free."

While his words were reassuring enough, Obi-Wan was sickened to feel a new tingling at the corners of his consciousness. The former Jedi Master was pushing against Obi-Wan's Jedi-trained mental defenses and attempting to access his most private thoughts. He struggled against the assault, but the pain

and distraction of the electric pulses still coursing through him ensured he was fighting a losing battle. In desperation, Obi-Wan sought to distract the Count with a verbal sally. "Well, I hope it doesn't take too long. I have work to do."

Dooku wasn't deterred, and sweat broke anew across Obi-Wan's brow as he tried to retreat mentally to higher ground.

Why do you run from me, my friend? Dooku's voice resounded in Obi-Wan's mind, even as he walked counter the direction Obi-Wan was being rotated by the containment field, thus forcing the Jedi to keep tabs on his tormentor's location both mentally and physically.

Dooku's slow pace spoke of an underlying arrogance and was in sharp contrast to the briskness of his invasion into Obi-Wan's mind. Obi-Wan bit back a gasp and fled, trying to set new mental barriers in his wake. He'd had other Force users in his mind before. Qui-Gon. Anakin. Even Master Yoda. But where their touches had been gentle, almost a caress, Dooku's was painful and humiliating.

"May I ask why a Jedi Knight is all the way out here on Geonosis?"

The energy currents surrounding his body increased, and Obi-Wan felt his mental footing slip. He struggled not to cry out. "I've been tracking a bounty hunter named Jango Fett. Do you know him?" His voice sounded stilted even to his own ears.

"There are no bounty hunters here that I am aware of. The Geonosians don't trust them," the count said.

But you can trust me, Obi-Wan. The words oozed into his psyche, sickening in their sincerity.

Obi-Wan tried again to flee, but Dooku's mental presence pinned him. The former Jedi Master was rooting through his memories like a Kowakian monkey-lizard scavenging through an open gut, pulling out what was useful, what could hurt him, and tossing the rest aside.

Obi-Wan's own feelings assailed him in a maelstrom of pain and loss.

The faint smell of stale floral perfume and coarse material against tiny fingers as he clung to his mother for the last time.

He mentally pressed against the memory, finally pushing it back only to feel the sweaty fingers of a fellow Jedi and childhood rival brush past his as the boy fell to his death.

Obi-Wan recoiled from the memory, and it gave Dooku the gap he needed to open the floodgates. Memories were ripped from him in a barrage of color, sound, and smell.

... red ears, face burning with the sting of a reprimand from his Master over a missed curfew...

...the weight of Qui-Gon's disappointment over a failed astronav exam...

...the light fading from Cerasi's eyes as life left her. Melida/Daan's last casualty...

... the feel of soft lips ghosting across his brow, not in promise of a deepening relationship, but in bittersweet acknowledgement of what could never be, as dictated by the Jedi Code...

... the sting of jealousy at the realization that Anakin would replace him as Qui-Gon's Padawan...

...the torture of being trapped behind an energy field, forced to watch as Qui-Gon battled a monster, knowing his Master would not survive the encounter...

...the agony of feeling the thread of their training bond dissolve as his Master became one with the Force...

... blind panic with the comprehension that the fate of a child was in his hands...

"Well, who can blame them? But he is here, I can assure you," Obi-Wan heard himself say, what felt like hours later, though in reality it must have been only a few seconds.

"It's a great pity that our paths have never crossed before, Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon always spoke very highly of you. "

Even if he wasn't ready to take another Padawan. It was an insecurity that normally no longer held any power over him. Obi-Wan knew all too well how an unwanted Padawan could grow to be as essential a part of a Jedi as any limb. But now, with his life flung around him like an overturned rubbish bin, the words seared him. Tears burned his eyes as he was lost again in the pain of a twelve-year-old child as he watched his last hope of a Master turn his back and walk away.

"I wish he were still alive." The Count sighed theatrically, and Obi-Wan heard the words, *too bad you weren't a little faster*, knife through his mind. "I could use his help right now."

"Qui-Gon Jinn would never join you." The words were a shield.

"Don't be so sure, my young Jedi. You forget that he was once my apprentice just as you were once his."

And I was his friend. This, Obi-Wan knew to be a lie. Dooku had been Qui-Gon's Master and his teacher, but he had never been his friend. It was a tactical error and the knowledge briefly empowered Obi-Wan.

"He knew all about the corruption in the Senate, but he would never have gone along with it if he had known the truth as I have," Dooku said, as he continued to circle maddeningly around his captive.

"The truth?" Obi-Wan cursed himself for the curiosity reflected in his voice. Dooku now knew intimately of his disdain toward the Senate and politicians in general and wasn't hesitating to use that knowledge against him.

"The truth..."

Dooku let the words hang there for a long moment, gathering strength, even as Obi-Wan prepared himself to disbelieve whatever came next. He could feel the Count's amusement at his efforts. *And just who do you think taught Qui-Gon that tactic?*

The words deflated Obi-Wan as the pervasive haze returned, robbing him of the tiny foothold he'd managed to garner.

"What if I told you that the Republic was now under the control of the Dark Lord of the Sith?"

"No, that's not possible. The Jedi would be aware of it," Obi-Wan said quickly, but his voice was shadowed with doubt.

Are you so sure, my young friend? An image from his memory of the star map room, the empty space just south of the Rishi Maze, bled into his mind's eye. He realized he was trembling and it was not entirely an effect of the containment field.

"The dark side of the Force has clouded their vision, my friend. Hundreds of Senators are now under the influence of a Sith Lord called Darth Sidious."

Clouded vision. His own errors in judgment. The failure of the Jedi at Antar, and dozens of other missteps that had precipitated the current crisis.

"I don't believe you." But he did.

"The Viceroy of the Trade Federation was once in league with this Darth Sidious. But he was betrayed ten years ago by the Dark Lord..."

It is not true, Obi-Wan told himself.

"... he came to me for help. He told me everything..."

It is not true. It is not true. It is not true, Obi-Wan repeated to himself, clinging stubbornly to his defiance, using the denial as a bulwark.

He could feel Dooku quashing his efforts, fogging his mind. Pressure bore down on his psyche like a vise. He twisted and struggled, but the grip only grew tighter, leaving him sluggish and confused.

The Jedi Council would not believe him, the Count continued his accusations mentally.

It is not true. It is not true. It is not true. It is not true.

The Count continued to pace, his movements becoming agitated. *I tried many times to warn them but they wouldn't listen to me.*

IT IS NOT TRUE.

But some tiny part of the Knight acknowledged that it might be. Had the Council not brushed off his concerns about his Padawan's readiness to carry out his mission with Senator Amidala? Dooku seized the flicker of doubt and exploited it mercilessly. All Obi-Wan's frustrations with the Council for ignoring his concerns crashed over him in a wave.

They see only what they want to see. They ignore your concerns. The words were coated in honey, soothing and seductive. *How many times did Qui-Gon warn you to keep your own counsel?*

It is... true. Force help him, it was true. Qui-Gon had often questioned the omnipotence of the Council. The Council had ignored his concerns about Anakin.

Dooku pounced on the admissions. *Once they sense the Dark Lord's presence, it will be too late.*

Too late. The words reverberated through him. They would be too late. The Senate was corrupt. The Council was floundering. The Republic would fall. His head spun with the implications of it all. He struggled to get air into his lungs. *What would his Master have done?*

"You must join me, Obi-Wan, and together we will destroy the Sith."

Destroy the Sith. Stop the Republic from obliterating itself. Save his Padawan. It sounded so simple. So tempting. Take matters into his own hands. Step away from the dictates of the Council and turn his back on the plethora of politics. Could he better serve the galaxy at Dooku's side?

Obi-Wan stood on a precipice, the edge of a cliff over a great yawning abyss. Pebbles gave way under his feet, their scraping against the soil representing his waning resistance. He felt emptiness open up under him as he started to fall. A voice not his own grabbed him.

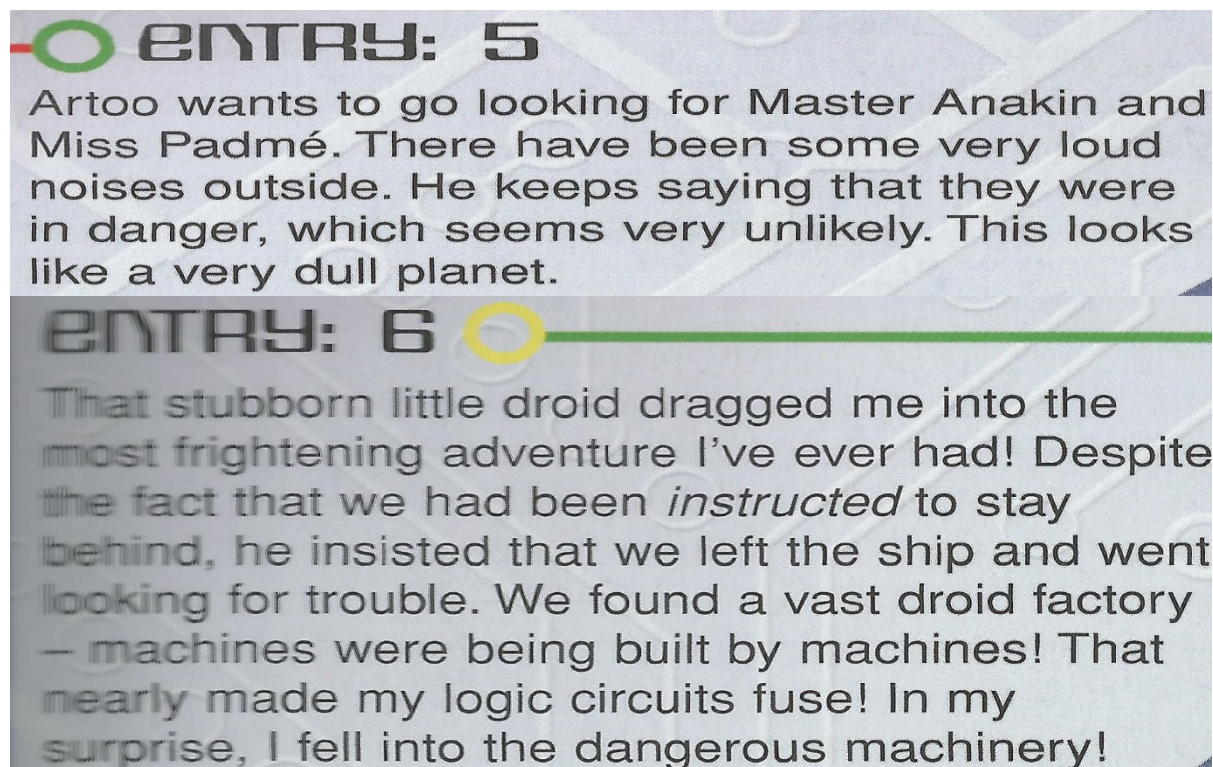
The very worst time is the time you must follow the Jedi Code. Cast away your doubt. Let the Force flow through you.

Qui-Gon. He clung to those words and let the truth of them rush through him. He found his footing. The ground coalesced under him. He could breathe. Relief and the luminous energy of the Force suffused him. He chose the Light. He chose the Jedi. Just as he had thousands of times in his life. Just as he would until the end of this days.

"I will never join you, Dooku," he swore.

The Count's shoulders slumped slightly in defeat and Obi-Wan felt the tendrils of the other's man presence slither out of his mind. As Dooku turned to leave, he said, "It might be difficult to secure your release."

What Dooku failed to understand was that he already had.



ENTRY: 7

I can hardly believe what has happened. My head was cut from my body! A battle droid head was attached to my body, and my head was welded to a battle droid body!

Outside, the Jedi Knights had arrived to rescue Obi-Wan, Miss Padmé and Master Anakin. A huge battle began between the battle droids and the Jedi's clone troopers...and I was drawn into the fight! Against my will, my separated head and body joined the battle!

At last, Artoo rescued me and put me back together. The brave Jedi warriors defeated Count Dooku's army, and Miss Padmé and Master Anakin were safe!

ENTRY: 11

When Padmé and I arrived on Geonosis we were captured and condemned to death with Obi-Wan. Padmé told me that she loves me! Just in time, a company of Jedi arrived and an almighty battle began.

Obi-Wan and I fought Count Dooku, but he defeated Obi-Wan and chopped my arm off! I fell to the ground next to my Master. Then Master Yoda challenged Dooku. They duelled at lightning speed, but Count Dooku managed to escape.

Jedi Starfighter – Act III

Adi is reunited with her Padawan, Siri Tachi, and the two escort the Republic assault ship *Aken*, carrying thousands of clone troopers and Master Yoda himself, to the surface of Geonosis. They battle past Geonosian starfighters and a blockade of Trade Federation Missile Frigates, and later aid the clone troopers in their initial strikes against the Confederacy on the planet's surface.

Meanwhile, Nym marshals his forces for a strike against the Trade Federation base on Lok, formerly Nym's own headquarters. First, they attack Lok's moon, Khons, and set up their captured cannon. It becomes a race against time with the arrival of a Trade Federation cruiser, though the Lok Revenants are able to install the cannon and destroy the oncoming cruiser. The cannon is deployed during Nym's main assault on the base, where it destroys several refueling Trade Federation dropships as Nym battles waves of starfighters. Sol Sixxa leads a speeder bike squad on a commando mission to destroy the main doors, allowing Nym to enter the base. Lieutenant Bella is waiting for him in her assault transport, and engages Nym in a vicious dogfight. Nym prevails, and finally takes back Lok. He is also joined by Vana Sage, companion from the battle of Naboo, who promises to track down Reti, else learn of his fate.

The First Battle of Geonosis has begun. Adi and Siri return to orbit, only to find Captain Toth's Hex fleet assembled above, ready to bomb the planet's surface and destroy the Republic war effort. Adi and Siri, aided by several other Jedi pilots in Delta-7 fighters, destroy the Hex Deployers and Bombers, though are subsequently forced to contend with two Sabaoth Destroyers and their starfighter complements. Fortunately, help arrives in the form of Nym's team, soon followed by three Mere cruisers. The Destroyers are overwhelmed, though a third appears to take their place: Toth's flagship. This, too, is unable to stand against the combined firepower of the Lok Revenants, though Toth himself escapes his doomed flagship in a personal starfighter. He challenges Adi to a dogfight, but is no match for the Jedi Master. He loses control of his starfighter, which explodes moments before his flagship suffers the same fate.

The battle below is won, though not without cost, as Mace Windu relays to Adi. Fortunately, with Toth dead, the Sabaoth Squadron is no longer a threat. The Jedi attempt to recruit Nym, impressed with his actions during the campaign, though he remains wary of joining the Jedi. Nevertheless, he is now a firm ally of the Republic, and Adi promises to continue serving as the protector of the Karthakk system.

Republic Commando – Geonosis

Delta Squad's first campaign is on Geonosis. Deployed from Kamino in separate LAAT/i gunships, they are sent to the war-torn Petranaki arena. En route to the insertion point, Boss meets the squad's direct Commander and advisor CC-01/425 through a holocomm unit. The clone advisor gives Boss information about his first mission — to find and eliminate the geonosian Separatist, Chief Lieutenant Sun Fac. As the gunship hovered to allow Boss and a clone trooper to rappel to the ground, a flying geonosian grabs and pulls out the trooper, killing him with a drop to the ground. Just a couple of meters after exiting gunship, Boss and two clone troopers are hit by an anti-infantry round. The nearby troopers are killed, while Boss' health scan shows 50 percent vitality. The advisor thus recommends healing procedures by using a nearby bacta dispenser. After doing so, Boss is ordered to secure the area around a nearby crashed gunship, where three clone troopers are under attack from B1 battle droids. After the droids are disposed of, Boss comes across a squad of clone troopers — 17, 35 and two others — who are defending a barricade against battle droids. Shortly after Boss' arrival, the droids blow through the barricade, killing one of the clones by the explosion. Despite this, Boss, 17, 35, and the other surviving trooper manage to push the droid lines back to an armored gun emplacement, which is preventing Republic troops from advancing. Boss is then assigned to take the gun position out with thermal detonators, allowing the troops to advance as well as clearing his own path. After pushing through debris from the destroyed gun position, Boss meets with the squad's demolition expert, Scorch. Another bunker is blocking the squad's way, so Boss assigns Scorch destroy it with a detonation pack. However an OG-9 Homing Spider droid blocks their path. The commandos call for assistance, and the LAAT/i gunship Harken responds, destroying the droid and allowing the clones to access the spire.

As they navigate the Geonosian corridors, Boss and Scorch encounters little resistance, and they meet with RC-1140 (Fixer), the team's slicer, who immediately is called to slice through a security door. They then must pass through several hangars, destroying geonosian starfighters as they proceed until they rendezvous with RC-1207 (Sev), the squad's sniper, on the balcony outside Sun Fac's planning room. Separating the squad from Sun Fac is a large glass wall, and as Boss shoots through it, Sun Fac escapes through a door, heading towards his fighter. While the squad is taking out super battle droids and battle droids, Sun Fac makes his way to his aircraft and warms up its engines. When the Deltas get to the hangar, they find him behind a shield,

starting up his fighter and taking off. As Boss assigns Sev to a sniper position, Fac decides turn his fighter's weapons on them. However, Sev is quickly successful in damaging the fighter's critical systems, causing it to crash back into the hangar, killing Sun Fac.

"As you already know, 36's squad has been incapacitated. Their mission was to disable a droid factory in this sector. Your squad has been retasked for his purpose."

—Clone Advisor CC-01/425^[src]

With this objective accomplished, the Advisor informs Delta squad that another commando's squad has been subdued while attempting to disable the droid foundries deep in the Geonosian hives. Delta squad is reassigned to this task, but they must first take out a nearby signal jammer, which is interfering with the republic's scanning attempts to find the weaknesses of the foundry. Taking a large elevator into the tunnels, Boss acquires a sniper attachment to his DC-17m blaster rifle. After making their way through a geonosian hatchery, they came across the jamming device. The squad disables its shield and destroys the jammer, repeatedly coming under attack from geonosians and droids. With the destruction of the jamming device, communications are restored, and the Advisor is able to give the squad the exact path to the foundries.

Although Advisor is able to scan the area of the factory, he isn't able to find any weakness Delta squad could hit to destroy it. Therefore Delta is assigned to find and slice the foundry's computer terminal and upload the complete factory schematics. Navigating through ventilation shafts, they find the console, giving the data to Advisor. The squad is informed of two power conduits that have to be destroyed to shut the factory down. Delta Squad continued through the shafts, and after encountering and overcoming more droid resistance, the squad finds the first power conduit. After destroying it, they proceed to the next one and eliminate it as well, after which they are evacuated by a gunship.

Their next objective is to infiltrate a nearby Confederacy *Lucrehulk*-class core ship which has been disabled, and retrieve the launch codes. These codes will give the republic an edge against the entire separatist fleet, as they can be used to prevent the droid armies from retreating the Battle of Geonosis. The gunship pilot has to drop Delta in greater distance from the Coreship as planned, due to a large anti-air turret placed near the core ship. They have to get to the core ship on foot through a canyon, encountering some Geonosian

resistance and several crashed gunships. As they approach the anti-air turret, en route to the ship, they encounter more and more battle droids. Advisor directs the squad to a loading mechanism for the turret and orders its destruction. Although they put a charge on the loading mechanism and detonate it, it doesn't stop functioning and the Deltas move to the upper level to place another charge, this one obliterating the mechanism completely. After disabling the turret, they proceed to the Core Ship, now with gunship support.

Sev: *"You're late to the party pilot!"*

Delta 42: *"You should be happy I got here at all. It's a nightmare out there."*

—Sev berates Delta 42 on his timing^[src]

Through several more canyons, Delta squad finds its way to the Core Ship entrance, but it's shielded. Since the door itself is deep in the landscape, the squad can't call in gunship support to punch through it's shielding. Therefore they go through another canyon passage to reach the next entrance. After reaching it, Deltas encounter an A-DSD advanced dwarf spider droid. As they fight it, the Advisor informs the squad about its only weakness, the red optical cluster in the middle of the droid's frame. After defeating it, they finally get to the entrance, discovering it's shielded as well, but in position suitable for air support. Shortly after Advisor calling it in, Delta 42's gunship appears above player's head and fires several rockets at the shield, warning the Delta squad to stand back in cover. The shield is now down and the squad is able to enter the hallway to the ship itself. The hallway leads Deltas to an extendible bridge, connecting the ship's hull with planet's surface. Since the bridge isn't extended, they have to slice a nearby console to extend it, while eliminating several droids guarding the entrance. When the bridge is extended, squad is ready to infiltrate the ship by entering its ventilation system. They are now assigned to two objectives. First to disable the ship for good and the second, to retrieve the important launch codes. The advisor reminds the player several times, how important these codes are. Since each squad member is tasked disabling different critical systems (Boss is assigned to disable the super battle droid storage racks, Scorch to detonating coolant intake valve, Sev to disabling the repulsorlift controls and Fixer to destroying the primary power conduit), the squad splits off and enter the ventilation shafts separately, to reach their objectives directly. This is the Republic's first breach of an enemy capital ship in the Clone Wars.

After player enters the ventilation shaft's elevator, he's taken to the Super battle droid storage racks. As he navigates through the racks full of droids on standby, other Delta squad members report reaching their objectives and successfully disabling the ship's systems. The squad's presence is no longer secret, as Boss runs into a Geonosian elite warrior that sounds an alarm, before Boss is able to kill him. As he finds his way to the next elevator, he encounters several Super Battle Droids activated. The second elevator takes Boss to a level where the storage racks controls are located. On his approach, Advisor uploads disabling protocols to him, tasking him with locating the control mainframe and inserting these protocols. Boss does this, causing explosions and short circuits in the racks, and destroying the mechanism's functionality. Now he's ready to meet up with Sev and the rest of the squad at level 1157. Encountering destroyer droids and droid dispensers for the first time, Delta squad makes its way through the ship's hallways to its command bridge. The ship's many systems are already malfunctioning, as a chain reaction started by disabling the four critical systems on the ship occurs.

Encountering heavier and heavier resistance with every meter they get closer to their objective, they enter the bridge. Under heavy fire from wall turrets and droids, they retrieve the launch codes from the mainframe console. The Deltas escape the core ship with help from Delta 42 and his gunship, who leads them to a hallway leading to the ship's hull surface, blasted the hull door open and evacuated Delta Squad shortly before the Core Ship's total destruction.

The Clone Wars

On Geonosis, Mace Windu and Luminara Unduli are sent to eliminate the planet's defenses prior to the arena battle. With the planet defenseless, the duo is set off to eradicate the enemy forces at a nearby landing zone to clear way for the transports carrying the Jedi. Once the transports reach the Petranaki arena, they unload their Jedi and rescue the heroes. However, Mace is forced to lead a group of elite Republic commandos on a mission to take out any launching Separatist ships. Afterward, Windu defeats three Dark Acolytes (mercenaries hired by Count Dooku).

A Soldier's Story: I Was A Gunship Pilot

CT-1155. Skifter, if you prefer.

We'd simmed something like Geonosis before, in the tank on Big Stormy. That's what we called Kamino. I'm talking glove on the stick, not holo-sims. The tank would let us try most anything: I'd flown over iceworlds, deserts, forests, swamps, anything they could generate using reconfigured floor plates and weather generators. In the tank you couldn't fly at altitude, so it was all ground-level stuff. But I'd holo-simmed re-entry a thousand times. I'm not exaggerating — I was pilot track right out of the vat. They started testing your eyes and reflexes before you could sit up.

The difference between holo-simming and flying in the tank? The holo-sims flew a little more smoothly, a little more predictably. Reality was messier, more random. And the real thing, on Geonosis, felt more random still. The place looked like a cross between Big Mesa and Badlands, but the geographic features were bigger and there was more atmospheric pressure. I noticed it immediately, when we broke from our Acclamator: The stick was heavier, the larty a little more sluggish. But it was nothing I couldn't handle.

I didn't know I'd be behind the stick of a larty until we were en route from Big Stormy. I didn't mind — I'd flown everything the customer had told the Kaminoans about, from fighters to dropships. Even driven an AT-TE a few times, just in case. Hated those things — I felt a lot better knowing there was another dimension to work with if I needed it.

And you know what? It felt different knowing there were bugs shooting back at us. We saw them right off, those crustacean-looking fighters. Ronto, my co-pilot, took a few out on our approach through the Im'g'twe Hills. We'd done live-fire drills, of course, but if someone dies in a live-fire drill, it means the other guy made a mistake. In the real thing, it means he did his job.

I could see lartys that hadn't made it, burning down below. But we touched down OK, just a little damage to the back quarter from a bug fighter that got off a lucky shot. I felt my stomach jumping while I was sitting there on the ground, like every missile and torpedo and turbolaser in the system was aimed

at me. I got the all clear, counted one-one-thousand two-one-thousand, then headed skyward to get more troops. I ran troops between assembly points all day, seeking targets both ways — run-and-guns, we called them. I don't know how many platoons we unloaded, how many bugs we took down, how many missiles we fired, any of it. They still have the telemetry somewhere, I suppose, but for me it all blended together within the first hour: sensor profiles, target acquisitions, drop-zone coordinates, flight paths, refuel, reload, repeat.

When it was all done, I could barely get my armor off. My back and legs and butt were killing me from wearing a body bucket all day, and my hands were crabbed from clutching the stick. I hit the rack and was out instantly, like I'd been hit with a stun blast. You know sometimes you wake up and for a moment you can't remember where you are? That happened the next morning. It wasn't till I felt the thrum of the Acclamator's drive that it came back to me. And I realized it was just the beginning.

ENTRY: 8

Master Anakin lost his arm in a fight with Count Dooku, and it was replaced with a mechanical one. Artoo and I are now on Miss Padmé's home planet of Naboo. We have come here to witness something very special and very secret. In the late afternoon, by the sparkling lake, Master Anakin and Miss Padmé were married.

CLONE TROOPER FALLS IN A HOLE...

From Geonosian Debriefings, Vol. III (Subject: CT-1226):

They dropped my regiment near the bug arena, smack in the middle of all these Hardcell transports our guys had trashed. We broke left in a skirmish line, pushing across the plateau, toward where Intel said the Sep command center should be. Behind us came the AT-TEs, with two quartets of SPHA-Ts at the rear, arcing laser blasts ahead of us and protecting the Acclamators while deployment continued.

Pretty smooth, all things considered—the only thing that struck me compared with the live-fire exercises was the noise. Every time a SPHA-T fired up its cannon or a larty zoomed by overhead my comm system would overload and go staticky. I couldn't hear a thing the lieutenant was saying and I knew the squad couldn't hear me, but I could see everybody on the HUD, and we'd simmed this enough. So I didn't think we'd be okay, exactly, not with all that Seppie metal flying around out there. But I knew we could do our job.

Then the HUD lit up red everywhere. I cranked up my magnification and saw just about every kind of clanker on the Sep roster coming at us—a wall of Hailfires and spiders and supers and a bunch of red-armored BIs thrown in for kicks, all coming hot. On the one hand, that was good—the fact that they were putting up a hell of a fight suggested we were on the right vector. On the other, I sure hoped someone had called for air support, because we were about to get mauled.

The Hailfires were in missile range and I had warning indicators everywhere when it happened. One moment I'm running along and the next I'm on my back and looking back the way I came—upside down. I couldn't hear anything and my HUD was out.

So once my brain unscrambled I realized I was lying on the forward slope of a brand-new crater, with my feet higher than my head. At first I thought a Hailfire had shelled us, but it turned out it was a projectile from one of our own walkers—one whose guidance system was glitched. The impact had knocked me down and I'd slid back into the crater.

So I crawled up the slope and poked my head

up and immediately put it back down, because I'm looking straight at the photoreceptor of a Hailfire, coming toward me at full speed. I guess it didn't see me, because it rolled right overhead—one wheel on either side of the crater. The anti-personnel cannon couldn't have been more than a meter above me. I watched it head toward our lines and stop about fifty meters out to recalibrate its targeting. I raised my deece, then lowered it, because what could I do? It would have been like a pinprick against the thing even at close range.

I should've been looking the other way, though, because I turn around and there are two tinnies looking down into the crater pointing their E-5s at me. Worse, stomping up right behind them is a super—one of the artillery variants with a forearm missile launcher instead of the integrated cannons.

I don't know why the tinnies didn't just shoot me. I guess they were telling me to surrender and hadn't gotten the message that we were playing for keeps that day. I'm not sure because I still couldn't hear anything but the ringing in my head. I don't remember if I put my hands up or not—the next thing I know, the super's smashed them aside with its missile launcher. Knocked their heads clean off. So now I figure the super's going to take me out, but its terrain sensors pick up the crater and it pivots to go around the edge. The B1s were between it and the AT-TEs—it never even saw me.

Before the super could get too far away I lined up on the heat exchangers on its back—that's a vulnerable point, if you should find yourself behind one—and gave it everything I had with the deece. I knocked the super down hard just as it launched a missile at our lines, and it wound up with its launcher sticking into the dirt like a spear. Instead of going over the Hailfire's head, the missile hits it dead center and turns it into a huge fireball. I had to duck because pieces of the drive wheels are flying everywhere. I pick my head back up and the super's on its knees trying to get its launcher unstuck, its logic module trying to process what just happened. I knew how the thing felt. I also knew if it got back up it would be lights-out for me. So I hit it with a droid popper, ran over, stuck my deece in the heat exchanger, and gave it three or four shots. Scratch one super.

Taking out the Hailfire blew a hole in the Sep's defensive screen—a hole the AT-TEs marched right through. Five minutes later I get a hand up into the walker's crew cabin, where they had a new bucket with a working HUD waiting for me.

I got a commendation for that. I tried to refuse it, but the generals kept talking about quick thinking and resourcefulness. Quick thinking? Smartest thing I did was fall in a hole.

Journal Of The 501st: Geonosis

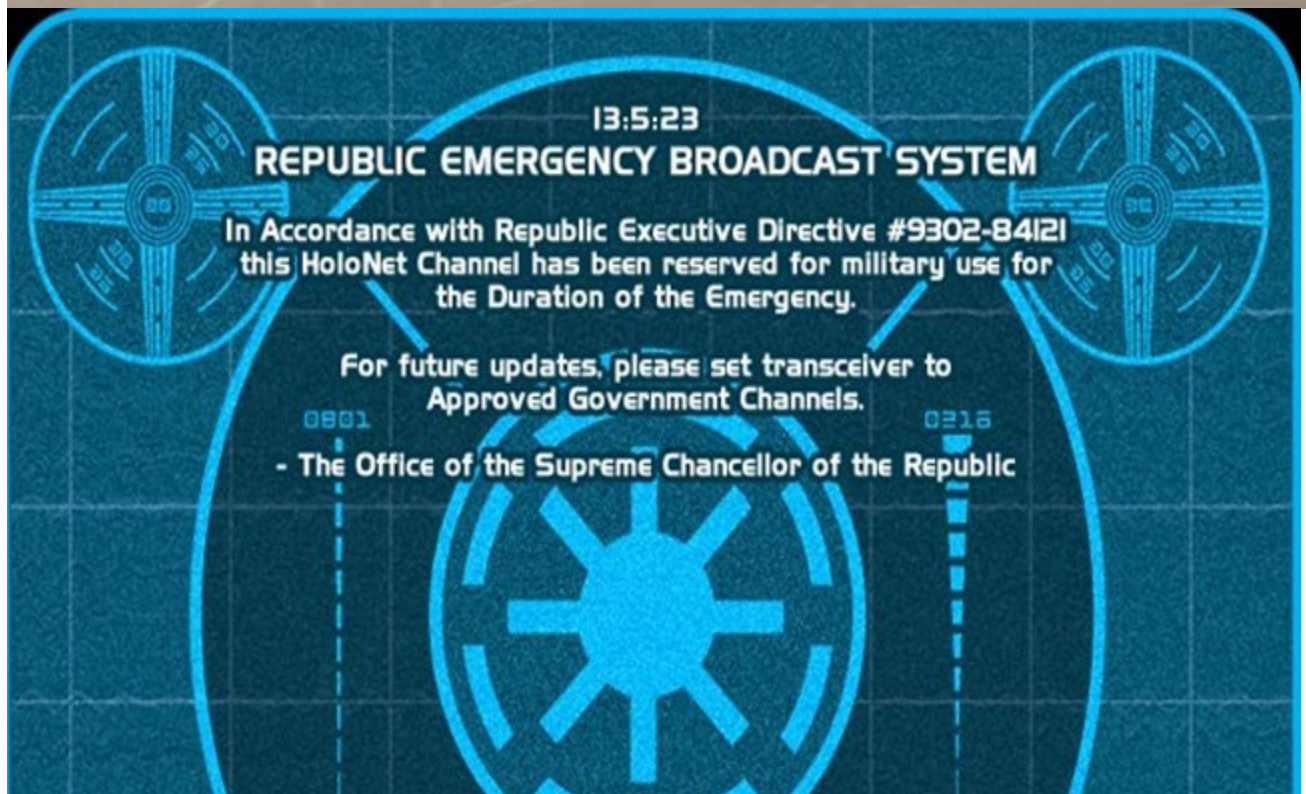
My first day as a member of the 501st... it was hot, sandy, chaotic and nothing at all like the simulations on Kamino. Of course that's pretty much the way it was for all of us, wasn't it? All that breeding, all those years of training... it doesn't really prepare you for the all the screaming, all the blood, does it? Frankly I'm still amazed we ever made it past the first hour, nevermind the first day.

Incredibly, the 501st survived the crucible of Geonosis, emerging battle-hardened, and ready for whatever the war would throw at us.

ENTRY: 12

I have a new mechanical arm – and a new secret. I have married Padmé. I do not know what will happen if the Jedi Council finds out, but she is more important than anything.

Supreme Chancellor Palpatine has given orders for thousands of clone troopers and has sworn to defeat the Separatists. A great war is beginning!



Jedi Starfighter - Finale

Shortly after the Battle of Geonosis, Mace Windu and Adi Gallia confer on the battle. Nym has refused to be a Republic commander in the Karthakk system, but they know he will be a valuable ally in the future, either way. Adi is given leave to head to the system to act as a Jedi advisor to Nym. As Adi and Nym head away from Coruscant, Vana Saga contacts them, saying that she has tracked down Reti (who was discovered by Jango Fett during a skirmish with Toth's forces and forced to run away into hyperspace). Pretty soon, one can only hope, this odd family can be reunited and get back to the work of protecting Nym's people.

3 days after the Battle Of Geonosis

Death In The Catacombs

The alarm sounded one second after the Force had told her something was wrong. She didn't have to see the output panel of her haz suit to realize they had triggered another trap. "Ambush!" shouted Jedi Knight Jyl Sontay into her comlink. "Evacuate immediately!"

Behind her, she heard the quick footfalls of clone troopers. Just ahead, through the thick Geonosian dust, she saw a small light, flashing more quickly with each second. Backing out rapidly, she hopped out of the tunnel and shouted at the squad of troopers. "Everyone down!"

The blast threw them farther out of the cavern's mouth. They fell to the hard-packed ground as the main force of the explosion, guided by the tunnel, mostly dispersed over them. She waited a few seconds-to gather her breath, she told herself. From somewhere far away, through the ringing in her ears, a voice sounded. "Are you all right, Commander?"

"I'm fine," Jyl said slowly, picking herself up and making a futile attempt to dislodge the red dust that seemed to cling to everything. "Any casualt-oh."

Through the settling dust, she made out a clone trooper laying flat on the cavern floor beneath a boulder released by the explosion. Its wedge shape with marks of machine tooling on its surface showed that it had been

deliberately placed there. A backup in case the explosion failed, she thought. I've got to be more careful.

"Just take it easy," she said, kneeling by the trooper. "We're going to get you out of here." She reached out to the Force and tried to raise the boulder so he could be moved. The rock shuddered slightly, but that was all. She motioned to the rest of the squad, who came and tried to lift the boulder.

The trooper bit off a moan then coughed harshly. A thin spray of red leaked through the joints of his cracked helmet. "Stand away," she said, reaching for her lightsaber. Depressing the activation button, an eerie turquoise light glowed in the cavern. The hiss of her lightsaber could not drown out the labored breathing of the clone. She started at the top of the boulder, cutting off portions slowly, then more quickly. The troopers raved the severed chunks to the side, until only about half of the boulder remained. "Now," she said, joining the remaining troopers as they came forward, "go."

With both muscle and Jyl's use of the Force, they managed to lift the boulder off the trapped clone trooper. Jyl quickly whipped off the trooper's helmet. "Get that med kit over here-" she began. "It's too late, Commander," said one of the other troopers, the breastplate of the trapped clone's armor had a large depression in it, and his face was still. The other clone troopers removed their helmets one by one and closed their eyes, revealing sad faces identical to that of the slain trooper.

Later, Jyl Somtay sat cross-legged on the floor of the Arena of Justice, trying to think of those who had died there rather than the absurdity of its name. A faint sheen of light from the 2roid ring illuminated the Arena, but the thirsty sands showed no trace of the blood of the Jedi who had perished there only days ago. It was as if their sacrifice held no more permanence than the curling drifts of dust that wove through the air around her.

She tried to clear her mind, tried to contact the spirit of her Master, Lura Tranor, one of the many who had paid the fast measure for their cause in this Arena. Coleman Trebor was another; she had been quite fond of the tall Vurk and already missed their conversations.

I should have been here, she thought. But she had been away when 200 Jedi were sent to Geonosis, her Master among them. She had never had a proper chance to say goodbye.

But now she was on Geonosis, promoted from Padawan to Jedi Knight after the battle in the Arena between Republic and Separatist forces. Only it was too late to do anything to help her Master.

"Master?" she said, faintly. But there was no answer.

There was no point to her meditation, but she kept her eyes closed, not trusting herself to open them.

"Commander?" came a hushed, insistent voice behind her. "Jedi Sontay?"

Jyl, finally realizing a clone trooper was talking to her, rose and turned, her long blonde ponytail whipping behind her.

"Yes, trooper?"

"Dr. Frayne has sent out a general alert for you. She wants to see you in her laboratory."

"Thank you," said Jyl. Gathering her robes around her, she walked to her Jedi starfighter outside the Arena. She stopped just before leaving, looking back one last time as if seeking something she had missed. She saw nothing but errant gusts of sand whipped about by the hot night wind.

She rode an orray from her quarters in the abandoned Trade Federation ship to the Central Laboratory. As she dismounted the beast, it drew away from her; it seemed uneasy. Jyl used the Force to draw it to her and calm it.

She felt the Force flow around her, through her, and she breathed it in. She was at the same moment its servant, its master, and its ally.

"Easy, boy," she said, patting the mount's leathery hide as the orray rumbled. "Nothing to worry about here."

As she returned the salutes of the clone troopers guarding the main door, she imagined that Dr. Frayne might use the same tone with her as she had with the orray. The scientist had not seemed pleased to have a Jedi Knight along on what she insisted was a scientific expedition, but the Jedi Council had

insisted, and, after a decree canjg from Chancellor Palpatine's office, Frayne had grudgingly acquiesced.

The remaining Geonosians understandably avoided contact with the Republic invaders, so Jyl had still never seen one in person, only holos, As she entered the main lab, she felt more strongly than ever that the diminutive Dr. Frayne, constantly bent over some piece of analytical equipment, peering through a pair of macrogoggles she rarely removed, resembled one of the planet's natives.

"Jedi Somtay," said Dr. Frayne, looking up from a diagnostic reading, "thank you for coming."

"Not at all, Dr. Frayne," replied Jyl, keeping her surprise from her voice. The doctor's disdain for her seemed to have been a product of her distaste for Jedi Knights multiplied by her contempt for Jyl's youth. "How goes the search?"

The old woman sighed. "Not as well as I had hoped, but better than I had expected. Look at this." She pointed at a holographic diagnostic cutaway of their sector of the planet, much of it threaded with green trails, including Jyl's recent expedition, with several red specks flickering harshly. "The Senate has been quite clear about the need to make sure Geonosis has no technology left with which its remaining inhabitants can imperil the Republic. But today I recalibrated all scanners to scan for processed metals. Observe the result." She turned a dial, which caused one of the red lights to flash even more brightly.

Jyl's cool gray eyes narrowed in comprehension. "A major source of technology-"

"With which the Geonosians could be plotting an assault against our occupation," said Frayne, with a nod.

" Or another trap," added Jyl.

"That possibility exists, of course. Still, I think you will agree it must be examined."

"Yes, of course. When do we go?"

"First," said Frayne, "I should like to discuss with you the matter of the clone trooper you lost."

"What about him?" said Jyl, coldly.

"It occurs to me," said Frayne, "that a stronger helmet may have enabled him to survive." She handed Jyl a helmet that resembled those worn by the clone troopers, with slight modifications. "This prototype helmet has been reinforced at the structural joins and is much more resilient. I would ask your opinion of it."

Flattered by Frayne's solicitation, Jyl donned the helmet. "It seems comfortable enough..." she began.

Too late, Jyl heeded the insistent presence of the Force, which had tried to pierce her concentration. She tried to jerk the helmet off but was too slow. A stinging gas issued from the helmet's interior, and she suddenly felt as though an orray had been dropped atop her. Before she could hold her breath, she was out.

When Jyl awoke, she was dismayed, though not surprised, to find her hands bound behind her and her lightsaber and comlink missing. She glanced at the entrance to the lab and saw the armored forms of the clone troopers lying motionless inside and to one side of the main arch.

Standing beside Dr. Frayne was a man she had seen working with Frayne's people. His slightly stooped posture hid the broadness of his shoulders and imbued his simple vest and pants with the weight of a scholar's robes. He wore a goatee that accented the lines of his face and softened the angularity of his features. She couldn't distinguish the color of his eyes.

She looked about the lab. There, on Frayne's main examination table, were her lightsaber and comlink. If she could just ignore the throbbing in her head and draw the lightsaber to her to sever her bonds.... Failing that, she could release the bind-;rs telekinetically, but that could be slow going.

There was time for neither gambit. Dr. Frayne turned to Jyl, smiling as she might at a presumptuous child. She laughed, with a sound like rusty bolts being shaken in a can. "Really, Commander Somtay, you are far too naive to be

a Jedi Knight, ot suspect that helmet might have been tampered /1 present my colleague, Naj Pandoor."

Jyl nodded. "Let me-" This was briefly interrupted by a coughing fit; her throat felt raw and unused. "Let me guess. You've been bribed by the Geonosians to get rid of me?"

"Geonosians are notorious for underpaying their employees," said Pandoor. His clear tenor voice gave the impression of civilized discussions in lecture halls on esoteric issues. "We're freelance."

"We?!" said Jyl, cocking an eye at Frayne.

"Pandoor originally tried to join my expedition using credentials stolen from a research assistant he waylaid. When his ruse was uncovered, I daresay I astonished him not by turning him in, but by asking to join him." She shrugged, disarmingly. "The Republic pays nearly as poorly as the Geonosians."

"It's a perfect partnership," said Pandoor. "She can identify and find the Geonosian technology that remains, and I can get it past the Republic blockade."

"So you're just another smuggler," said Jyl.

"I think of myself as a scholar," said Pandoor, in a tone of mock offense.

"Actually, Pandoor, Jedi Somtay has categorized your species with the unerring precision of a scientist," said Dr. Frayne. Jyl and Pandoor turned to Frayne just in time to see her draw a blaster from behind her back.

As Pandoor fumbled for his sidearm, Jyl tried to use the Force to jerk the weapon from Frayne's hands, but she was too late. It sounded once, and Pandoor fell. Then it sounded again.

Waking up this time, Jyl's pain was even worse. Surrounded by absolute blackness, she feared for a moment she was blind. But the Force told her she wasn't blind, and she wasn't alone. She was seated on a hard, packed surface, kept in a sitting position by someone behind her whose hands were bound together with hers. It took no Force-granted insight to guess his identity.

Using a brief Jedi meditation to tamp down her pain, Jyl turned her head and hissed, "Pandoor, wake up!" She rocked from side to side and finally the weight behind her stirred.

"Sh-she betrayed me!" His voice was harsh and raspy. "The witch double-crossed me!"

Despite the circumstances, Jyl chuckled. "I'm sure you couldn't have seen that coming."

"Neither did you, Commander Jedi."

"I didn't know what she was. What's your excuse?"

"Me? I just wanted some time alone with you."

Jyl sighed. "That's not helping."

"Neither is your fidgeting like that."

"I've been trying to untie your bonds," said Jyl. "But they're too tight."

"And here I just thought you wanted to hold hands," replied Pandoor.

"Will you take this seriously?"

"But I am, Jedi Somtay. I've decided that Dr. Frayne must have wanted to torture me."

"Torture you? Why?"

"Because she didn't tie us front-to-front."

Jyl again wished she had her lightsaber, though she had an entirely different use for it in mind.

"I wonder where we are?" said Pandoor, finally.

"Smell the air? That's soil. And it's moist. From the echo of our voices, I'd say we're in a deep cavern. Frayne must have disposed of us here."

"Yes, probably with one of those antigravity carts used for hauling large specimens. I think one of us has been insulted."

"That would be me," said Jyl, "left here tied to you."

"I wonder why she did leave us here, rather than just killing us?"

"Because she knew something would do it that wouldn't point to her," replied Jyl. "Hear that?"

"No, I don't-

"Hush! Be ready to move when I say." She automatically closed her eyes, despite the total blackness of their pit, and concentrated. She heard a faint stirring of dirt, disturbed and pushed to one side. The scrape of appendages on the ground as something-a lot of somethings-approached. With them came the guttural sounds of a language spoken from the very back of the throat, syllables interspersed with frequent clicks and glottal stops.

ùGeonosians. The Jedi knew at least several thousand of them remained behind. None of the Republic forces had seen them, though the evidence laid in a footprint here, a small job of sabotage there.

Pandoor heard them then. He stirred restlessly. Jyl jabbed her elbow into his back as hard as she could with minimal movement. They could learn more if the Geonosians thought them unconscious.

Something stroked her face. She heard the faint rasp of metal, certainly weapons being drawn. That was all she needed to know.

"Now!" she shouted, and sprang to her feet. Pandoor followed her lead-he could do little else, with his hands bound to hers-and she was rewarded with a chorus of voices, frightened and startled by the sudden activity.

Something hard struck her, and Jyl accessed the Force, shitting rapidly to one side. Something heavy brushed past her in the dark, barely missing her. She swung Pandoor around, his feet striking several of their attackers, his astonished cries doing almost as much damage by startling them.

"Stop it! Ow! What are you-no!"

Jyl felt the manacle binding them begin to give and spun faster, trying to use the Force on the locking mechanism. There was a metallic clatter nearby and then, suddenly, the echoing whine of one of the Geonosian sonic blasters.

Jyl expected this and pushed herself backward, the shrieks of both Pandoor and the Geonosians remarking on the unexpectedness of the maneuver. In the brief, verdant blast, she saw the low ceiling and close walls of the cavern covered with Geonosians, and more pouring from a narrow tunnel, wings scraping against each other with a chitinous whisper.

"Oh, blast!" shouted Pandoor, seeing the odds against them. Finally there was a metallic rasp, and Pandoor flew from her, screaming like a soprano in a Coruscant opera as the manacle binding them gave. Jyl sprang forward and tackled the nearest pile of limbs. Whatever she struck had to be an enemy, while whatever they struck would likely be an ally. The clatter and ticking of the Geonosian voices were punctuated with several utterances she took to be cries of pain.

Then she felt a long, smooth shape, narrowing to a point at one end while expanding to a heavy weight at the other. She wrenched it from the hands of its wielder and began swinging. In the strobing bursts of the sonic blasters, she saw Pandoor seize a weapon, fiddle with its controls, and quickly toss it away.

From across the chamber a mechanical keening pierced the air, sounding ever higher. All movement from the Geonosians ceased for a moment, then they rushed past Jyl in a flow of whispers and clucked imperatives.

Jyl recognized the sound and, waiting until the precise moment, seized the nearest native, slammed the heavy end of her weapon against its head, and held its unconscious form between her and the mechanical keening, wing side out.

The sonic blaster overloaded, its artificial scream culminating in an explosion that sounded louder in the confined space than it was. Jyl was inundated by a spray of dirt from across the chamber.

She saw pale lights through the clearing dust. Jyl dropped her shield, crouched low and hurried toward the light.

Even the stars of the night sky seemed exceptionally bright to her. She emerged in a gully between two of the Geonosians' towering spire-hives. Behind her, she heard countless dry limbs withdrawing deeper into the spire-hive.

A pair of hands grabbed her. She whirled, jamming the sharp end of her weapon forward.

"Ow!" Naj Pandoor fell backward, left hand flying to his right forearm, from which now issued a copious flow of blood. "I'm on your side!"

"And so was Dr. Frayne," observed Jyl. "Turn around and start marching. It can't be too far to my base in the Trade Federation ship. I can cobble up a makeshift brig."

Her captive stared at her incredulously. "You're turning me in?"

"A self-confessed smuggler bearing false credentials on 3 planet filled with dangerous technology? The thought had crossed my mind. For all I know, you intended to bury me back there when you overloaded that sonic staff."

"I almost buried myself as well, you might have noticed," he replied. "But given our position, I thought the odds acceptable." More than anything else, he resembled a body excavated from a mudslide, but the moonlight softened the gauntness of his features, she noticed, and his deep-set eyes gave him an air of intrigue.

"Look," he continued, "you need me. I know what Frayne was up to. You stand a better chance of stopping her with me than without me."

Jyl removed the ring from her ponytail and shook her hair, sending a fine film of dirt into the night air. "Just tell me what she was up to, and I'll put in a good word for you-if it's the truth."

"That'll take too long. She could be escaping right this moment. In my ship," he added, bitterly. "At least let me alert The Republic blockade."

Jyl pointed. "That way. The nearest comm station is in the main lab, just a kilometer or so away." She set off on a brisk run and Pandoor, after a moment, set off after her, stifling a groan.

As they ran, Jyl regarded the planetary ring that seemed to bind the Geonosian sky. An occasional flash of light pierced the night sky, followed by a trail of smoke and a fearsome shriek as a sizable object embedded itself in the planet's surface.

"Asteroids from the planet's ring," said Jyl, catching her breath. "That's one reason so many of the natives live deep in the catacombs."

"What's that glow on the horizon?" puffed Pandoor. "It's quite beautiful."

"And deadly. Radiation storms. They can be more or less predicted, but if you see one coming at you, dive for cover."

"Into a catacomb. With the Geonosians."

"Nice place, isn't it?" commented Jyl, dryly.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Pandoor, looking at her. "It has its attractions."

Minutes later, the lab came in sight as they topped a dune. "I wish we had the time to get fresh clothes," she said, "I'm squirting dust from every pore." She didn't want to imagine what she must look like. Then she wondered why that bothered her.

"To me," replied Pandoor, "you look like an angel."

Jyl felt her cheeks flush. "A smooth talker, too. You smugglers always are."

"I didn't set out to be a smuggler-"

"I know all the stories. Did you come from a broken home, are you a rebel against an unjust system, or are you earning the fee to buy your sister out of slavery?"

"Actually," he said, "I was a graduate student in Xenoarchae-oiology at the University of Ketaris. But when the University went bankrupt, it took my academic career with it. From Xenoarchae-ology to smuggling is a more direct route than you might think."

"Especially if you cut Ethics class." They were in the main lab's shadow now. Although the main hatch was open, the place was dark. From either side of the doorway, Jyl saw various trickles of light from consoles, but no motion. Reaching out with the Force, she felt no life inside, but she wouldn't have cared to bet hers on that assumption.

After several seconds, however, Jyl lifted a few pebbles with the Force and flung them inside. The stones bounced off the floor with a clatter, but caused no other commotion. "I think it's safe," said Jyl, sidling inside. "She wasn't expecting us to return. An empty lab doesn't necessarily indicate trouble. A booby-trapped fab does."

"Beauty before age," said Pandoor.

Jyl ran to the comm board and quickly called the Republic flagship. "They report no attempts to run the blockade," she said, minutes later. "Frayne must still be planetside."

"That's something," said Pandoor. "I was worried sick she'd get herself blown up."

"I didn't think you were that concerned about her."

"I'm not-but she could get my ship blown up with her."

"You won't have any need for a ship where you're going." Pandoor had no comeback to that.

Activating the main display, Jyl quickly picked out the technology reading Frayne had shown to her earlier. "There she is."

"Not quite," said Pandoor, leaning past her and working the console. "She built a 15 percent displacement differential into the readings. You could search those coordinates for days and not find her." The holographic map

shuddered, went blank, and then flickered into life again, showing slightly different readings. "That's where she is," nodded Pandoor, pointing to the brightest light.

"She'd better be," said Jyl. "That's an odd place for a cache of Geonosian technology."

"That's why you need me. I know her whole operation, but I can't do you any good from a Republic cell."

"All right," said Jyl, after a long moment. "But the first time you try anything-"

"There won't be a first time," he said. Pandoor cast a glance around the cavernous lab as they left. "This whole planet gives me the creeps."

"I know. All this technology...but it's all hidden, all underground. There's something wrong about it."

"You see?" Pandoor smiled charmingly. "We have a lot in common."

"We're both carbon-based life forms," replied Jyl, "that's all." They took a small troop transport to the coordinates indicated and found themselves standing in the middle of a patch of desert composed of nothing but drifting sand, save for one feature.

"The cache must be below that stalagmite," said Jyl, "Let's go."

"I don't suppose it would do any good to suggest waiting until some clone troopers arrive as reinforcements?"

"No, it wouldn't," she said, with a grim smile. "I don't want to give Frayne any more time."

"At least I got a smile out of you," said Pandoor, following her footprints in the sand. "Triads a start."

The stalagmite was a massive protuberance of rock created when the planet was in its-birth throes thousands of centuries earlier. Despite its age, its surface seemed as rocky and barren as the day it was formed.

"There must be an access point," said Jyl, moving slowly along the slab of rock, her Song fingers running over its craggy surface. "Yes, look here."

She moved toward a surface of rock then, seemingly, through it and was gone.

"Hey!" said Pandoor, rapidly approaching the same spot and finding nothing. "Where are you, Angel?"

"Here," came Jyl's voice, echoing in the darkness. Pandoor shone his torch on the area, and saw that what seemed to be a natural curve of rock was actually two layers, concealing a narrow cut of space between them, Jyl looked up at the beam of light that danced before her. "Come down," she said, "Frayne's got to be down here. And put out that light, it'll take that much longer for your eyes to adjust." Pandoor obliged, reluctantly. The crevice was a tight fit, even for his lean build. Once past the entrance the crevice widened, giving onto a fairly large corridor of natural volcanic rock. "A perfect hiding place," he said, his voice echoing off the walls. "You could hide anything down here." "That's what I'm afraid of," came Jyl's solemn reply. "Let's keep the lights off, and the noise, to a minimum."

"Anything you say, Angel."

"That's the kind of noise I'm talking about."

"Sorry.. Jyl." But he didn't sound sorry.

The cavern walls gave off a kind of phosphorescence in which it was easier to distinguish shapes than details. Still, Jyl hoped he could make out her frown. "You will address me as 'Jedi,'" she said tightly.

"Sorry, Jedi Somtay."

They proceeded slowly, Jyl casting ahead with the Force, hoping to sense any kind of life that might be waiting within. But trying to differentiate between native fauna and life that carried hostile intent was useless. Everything on this planet seemed hostile.

Just then came a juicy thwack, like a melon being hit. "What was that?" asked Jyl.

"Just a rock I kicked," replied Pandoor.

"Are you sure? That didn't sound like a rock, it was.. .wetter, as though it was filled with liquid, or-" Spurred by a sudden spike in what was either the Force or her native instincts, she activated her beamlight.

There was Dr. Frayne-or at least, her head.

"She was decapitated by something long and sharp," said Jyl, after a cursory examination. "That's all I can tell without a lab. Maybe her body will provide some clues."

"If we can find it," said Pandoor, cautiously, from the other side of the cavern. "There's not much else of her left."

The only other evidence that Frayne had been present was her equipment, which had been scattered all around the chamber.

Around the cavern lay splotches of blood of varying sizes. In the cavern's dim light, the surface of the blood seemed to move, as if of its own accord. Pandoor knelt to examine this phenomenon, but Jyl grabbed his wrist in an iron grip.

"Don't touch that," said Jyl. Pandoor saw the blood was covered by what must have been hundreds of thousands of tiny insects, swarming in what at first looked like a random pattern, but was too purposeful to be meaningless. "Rogas," she said, "fierce insects."

Pandoor nodded. "Yes...some scientists theorize the Geo-nosians evolved from them."

"Evolution's done pretty well by them as they stand," replied Jyl. "If they swarm over you, you won't have too long to worry about it. But they didn't kill Frayne."

"No, that was some kind of animal," said Pandoor, his beam-light shaking only a little. "She probably disturbed it in its lair."

"More likely it was put here to guard whatever the Geo-nosians left behind," said Jyl, rapidly sorting through the erratically distributed contents of a backpack. "Do you see?"

From across the cavern came a familiar snap-hiss and a turquoise radiance, eerie in the phosphorescence. Jyl turned, springing to her feet.

"I found your lightsaber, Angel," said Pandoor, his tone very quiet. He drew it back and forth before him, accustoming himself to the torsion the weapon acquired when activated. He slashed out at an inoffensive stalactite, sending its fragments showering about the cavern. "I can see why you Jedi favor this weapon," he said, in the same tone. "It's...unique."

"Give me that," demanded Jyl, striding toward him.

For a moment, Pandoor's green eyes glinted in the glare of the light blade. Their gazes met through the gloom of the cavern,

Pandoor smiled and deactivated the lightsaber. "Of course, Angel," he said, with a winning smile, handing the weapon to her.

She took it and released a breath, as Pandoor lifted his other hand, revealing his blaster. "May I keep this?" he asked, with exaggerated courtesy.

"I'm afraid you may need it," said Jyl. "Let's proceed, but cautious-"

The thing was on them like a wind with teeth. Its rush thrust Pandoor aside, where he lay, silent and still. Jyl froze, but it turned to her anyway, catching her scent.

Its teeth glinted like a rack of knives in the dim cavern light. The four eyes widened and narrowed in the spade-shaped head as its nostrils quivered. Its long claws were fully extended.

The nexu's tail twitched from side to side almost lazily as it took its bearings. Then it leaped.

Even aided by the Force, Jyl barely managed to dodge it. The snap-hiss of her lightsaber was nearly lost as the muffled howl of the predator bounced off the cavern's walls.

She fainted to the right and then went to the left, bringing up her blade. But the creature managed to alter its course, the lightsaber trimming only a centimeter or so from its coat.

The smell of burnt fur wafted through the cavern as Jyl moved warily backward, slowly moving the lightsaber blade back and forth before her.

"Pandoor?" she hissed. "Naj!" But no reply came, and she dared not take her eyes off the nexu, even to explore the warmth slowly threading its way down from the dull ache in tier leg. The nexu had gotten her; she used the Force on the artery nearest her wound to slow the bleeding and anesthetize the pain.

The nexu's leg muscles bunched as it prepared to spring again, but just before it could leap, a sizzling laser blast from outside Jyl's field of vision just missed it. The beast turned, as puzzled as it was angry, to Pandoor, who fired his blaster again. 'Your turn,' he said, stepping forward once.

Jyl reached out with the Force, sweeping her right hand parallel to the cavern floor. The fragments of the stalactite Pandoor shattered lifted and flew at the nexu, as Jyl took two steps forward.

The nexu howled as they continued their tag-team attack, turning its head from one target to the other, baffled by their conduct.

Jyl thought quickly. All she needed to put the nexu away was ine good slash with her Sightsaber, but to get close enough to strike also put her in danger. And the nexu was probably fa ' tan a Jedi-or at least, faster than she was.

Finally in position, Jyl ignited then extinguished her light-saber rapidly several times, shouting at the monster as she did so.

The nexu leaped toward the nearest, noisiest target. Jyl sprang forward and rolled in the air, landing under the hurling nexu. She kicked, her feet

catching the nexu in its ribs and stomach, sending it further than it had intended to spring; and no longer in control of its direction.

Despite this interference, the nexu rolled to an upright position in midair, landing gracefully on the cavern floor. Its head swiveled from one foe to the other, and then it twitched as a shudder rippled through its supple body. It lowered on its haunches, preparing for another spring-then abruptly turned its head and began to gnaw at itself.

Even in the faint cavern luminescence, Jyl could see the darkness spreading like a shadow over the nexu. A creature of instinct, it knew what perils of Geonosis even it had to avoid, at risk of death, but Jyl's kick had changed its direction, and it had landed in a place it would never have dared go willingly.

The nexu howled again as the rogas swarmed over it, deserting the chilling blood on the cavern floor for hotter, fresher prey. The nexu threw itself against the cavern walls, rolling on the floor, taking off patches of its own pelt with its claws, trying to expel the multitude of tiny predators that had invaded it.

Across the cavern Pandoor leveled his blaster at the nexu. "No!" whispered Jyl. "Don't remind him we're here!"

The nexu remained still for a moment before shooting off through the cavern, deeper into the darkness, its agonized howls finally fading.

"Tag-teaming it like that was a good idea," said Jyl.

"We make a good team," said Pandoor. "Are you all right?"

She looked at her injury. A thin red line snaked its way down her right leg, bordered on either side by the slash in her leggings that curled away from the wound like old parchment.

Jyl examined the wound, which had already stopped bleeding. "Just a scratch," she said briskly, extinguishing her light-saber. "Let's go."

Pandoor knelt before her and gently placed his index and middle fingers on either side of the wound, slowly tracing its progress down the long curves of her leg. "Hey!" said Jyi, after a few seconds, as she took a step backward.

"No sign of infection," said Pandoor, with mock solemnity, as he rose.

"Now you're a doctor?"

"You have to do a little bit of everything in my line of work-rather like yours, 1 suspect," he replied, falling in beside her. "We do make a good team, you know, and we're not even on the same side. Imagine if we were."

"There's not enough time to tell you why you'd never make it as a Jedi."

"I was talking about you joining me. As a smuggler."

"You're joking," she said. "I'm a Jedi, not a thief. Being a Jedi is my life. I'd never be happy in your world."

"You don't look so happy being a Jedi. In fact, you don't look like any Jedi I've ever seen. It's a shame. That angel's face ought to smile once in awhile."

"You're everything I despise," said Jyl.

"I think I could make you feel differently," he said, placing a hand on her arm.

Jyl was unconscious of bringing up her lightsaber, of igniting it and swinging the blade so close to Pandoor's throat he could feel its heat. Her Master would have been proud. ^ "Listen," she said, through her teeth, "I'm here on a mission. Either help me or fight me, then at least then i'll know where you stand."

Pandoor brought his empty hands to shoulder-height then spread them in a show of resignation. "Anything you say... Jedi Somtay."

"Good." She deactivated her fightsaber, leaving the silence of the catacomb.

They proceeded down the corridor slowly, cocking their heads warily for any warning noise that might precede another threat. They heard nothing, and eventually came to a rough-hewn central chamber off of which five corridors split.

"Whatever we're after is this way," said Jyl, consulting a data-pad and pointing toward the mouth of the farthest corridor. "And not far, either."

"After you, Jedi Somtay," said Pandoor.

"Rogues before angels," she replied, motioning him forward.

Minutes later they stood before a boulder. "It's solid, all right, Jedi Somtay," Pandoor said, after a few seconds of probing and pushing.

"The readings are coming from behind it," said Jyl. "It's too heavy for me to move with the Force, but I don't like the idea of using explosives this far beneath the surface..."

"Neither do I, Jedi Somtay," said Pandoor. He began to poke at the perimeter of the boulder, where it met the cavern wall.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," said Jyl.

"Where's that legendary Jedi patience, Jedi Somtay?" said Pandoor. "Ah." This accompanied a crisp click that sounded throughout the cavern.

The boulder glided to one side, revealing a blast of light that hurt their eyes. They both brought up their weapons then, after a few seconds, looked at each other. "Do you sense anything ...Jedi Somtay?" asked Pandoor.

"Stop that," she said, edging in front. The boulder revealed a fully equipped lab, obviously geared toward weapons research. Indirect lighting gleamed off rows of weapons and weapon components, the latter placed near the outer reaches of the lab, the former placed in racks on a central console. To Jyl's trained eye the design of the facility, proceeding concentrically outward from the central console, unmistakably proclaimed it the product of the Genosians' ruthless efficiency.

The door slid shut behind them, perhaps on some sort of timer switch.

Jyl advanced slowly, her eyes on the central console. She looked quickly to one side, thinking she had seen a flurry of movement just outside the range of her vision. But there was nothing there. Just my eyes adjusting to the light, she thought. On the central console, beneath a cube of transparisteel, lay a bulky device composed of a handle, complex controls and several buttons about where the thumb of the wielder would fall, which expanded into several narrow tubes.

"Don't touch it," said Jyl, receiving an acid look from Pandoor. "It might be wired to an alarm or a security device."

"An odd kind of weapon," murmured Pandoor. "Looks rather clumsy, actually. And that central section has insufficient space for blast-generation."

"I don't think it's a blaster."

"Then what is-" Pandoor's voice cut off and after a second, Jyl turned.

"What did you-?" She stopped, realizing she was staring down the muzzle of Pandoor's blaster. It looked larger from this perspective.

. Before she could take any action, Pandoor pulled the trigger. She felt the hot charge streak by her head then behind her, where she heard an indignant screech.

Whipping around and bringing up her lightsaber, Jyl saw four legs, terminating in large, arched claws, trailing down behind a tall cabinet, followed by a naked tail whose forked end smoldered slightly.

"The nexu!" said Pandoor.

"It can't be," said Jyl, activating her lightsaber nonetheless. "That was too small for the one we look at this."

Lying behind the consoles were the components of Dr. Frayne's skeleton, thoroughly gnawed, the shredded remains of her garb littering the floor. Lots of little skittering motions fled as Jyl approached. She was conscious of being watched by several sets of eyes.

Then it dawned on her, from some intuition or the Force. "The nexu-it was a female, and-"

"And what?" demanded Pandoor.

"And a mother."

From behind the consoles and counters they came, spurred on by the courage of numbers. A litter of ten nexu, a mass of gangly legs and feet, surmounted by chubby bodies, advanced slowly and uncertainly, their curiosity overcoming their fear.

"Oh, no," whispered Pandoor.

"No sudden moves," said Jyl. She powered down her light-saber and advanced slowly toward the nexu in front, crooning to it slowly, softly, reaching out with both her left hand and the Force. "Hey, little one. No one's going to hurt you. No, no one at-"

An instant later, and she would have lost her hand. As it was, it had a wide gash in it when she yanked it back.

The nexu cub lapped up the blood Jyl left behind with a long, curving tongue, then sprang.

Jyl ignited her lightsaber and swept it all around her in a defensive movement while she got her bearings. Across the lab, Pandoor was firing his blaster ineffectually at streaks of gray that circled all around him.

There was obviously another way into the lab used by the nexu, but it was just as obviously useless to Jyl and Pandoor. They'd have to leave by the way they came-if they left at all.

"One of the nexu got through her lightsaber perimeter. She kicked it back, withdrawing a bleeding foot, the Bantha leather of her boot slashed. The other nexu lapped up the blood as she retreated. They're developing a taste for me, she thought, with a shudder.

Then, as she saw two of the nexu hissing at each other over the last drop of blood, she had it,

"Naj!" she shouted. "Distract them!"

"What do you think I've been trying to do?" he replied. But he began making whooping noises and moving more rapidly, a ploy that seemed to work. The nexu cubs began closing on him.

Jyl narrowed her focus on the Force, concentrating not on all the nexu, but on only one stubborn one that lagged behind, the one with the burnt tail. As it neared her, she lowered her light-saber, presenting a better target.

"Jyl!" shouted Pandoor. She wasn't sure if he was watching her, or if he was simply in over his head. It really didn't matter. The nexu leaped, and Jyl slashed her lightsaber upward, cleaving the cub from throat to crotch. The nexu's remains plopped in the middle of the lab floor. Jyl stepped back and waited.

One by one, the cubs turned from their uncooperative human prey to the more accommodating meal waiting for them. They were all soon eating their littermate, making contented mewling noises as they did so.

"They were hungry," said Jyl. "Let's go." Pandoor nodded and made for the door. Jyl followed, on the way out cleaving the transparisteel cube with her lightsaber and retrieving the weapon within. Whatever alarm the case might have been hooked up to couldn't have been worse than a litter of nexu. She hooked the weapon to her belt-it was surprisingly light-weight, despite its appearance-and made for the exit, glancing back to make sure the nexu were still occupied with their feast. "So what is that thing?" asked Pandoor, as they made their way to the cavern's mouth. "It's a sonic weapon," said Jyl, hefting the device. "We went through all this for another sonic weapon?" "Not just another one," replied Jyl. "Lightsabers are no defence against a normal sonic blast-until you determine the blaster's frequency. But I think the circuitry on this one enables it to vary its frequency automatically."

"It'd be pretty bad if the Geonosians mass-produced those," said Pandoor, with a low whistle.

Jyl nodded. She felt suddenly weary, and eager to have the mission complete. "I'll be sure to transmit the Republic courts a copy of my report," she said. "I can't help but think that would weigh in your favor."

I'd appreciate that," said Pandoor, glumly. He sighed then after a moment, smiled. "But we are a good team, aren't we, Angel?"

I have to admit, we are," said Jyl, matching his smile. He stepped closer to her. "And I have to admit, I'll miss you

You will not" she said. "You must know lots of girls."

"None like you," he replied, softly. "You're different, Jyl."

"I am not," she said dubiously. Then she cast a shy glance at Naj. "Am I?"

"You are, too. You're special."

She met his gaze, and stopped smiling. He pushed a mass of hair back from her shoulder with one hand and put his other arm around her waist. Leaning in, he kissed her.

His mustache tickled.

Later, Naj stepped back. Jyl opened her eyes, and found Pandoor pointing the sonic weapon directly at her.

"Now you know where I stand, Angel. As you said, lightsabers are no defense against a normal sonic blaster, much less this one. And I have no desire to see how much weight a Jedi's word will carry at my trial. It'll be years before they find you here. You know, Dr. Frayne was right, you are too naive to be a Jedi Knight. What a waste."

Jyl reached out with the Force, but Pandoor's grip on the weapon could be broken by nothing less than a falling boulder. She reached out, farther.

"I think I've got the hang of this thing, Angel," he said, as the sonic weapon emitted a low hum. He looked up at her, with no trace of a smile. "I hope it doesn't hurt."

"I wish I could say the same," said Jyl, looking past him.

He started to turn, but he was too slow to bring the weapon up.

The mother nexu, driven mad with pain from its rogas infestation, slammed into him, raking open a section of his back as he fell.

Jyl dove, bringing the sonic weapon to her with the Force as the nexu hit the ground a few meters away, already pivoting to attack again. Quickly changing the settings, she hoisted the weapon in both hands and fired.

A low hum permeated the cavern, then, for a moment, total silence. A kind of concentric blur from the weapon's muzzle swept through the air, leaving both the nexu and Pan-door unconscious.

Breathing hard, Jyl examined the nexu. The sonic blast had killed the rogas, and the recuperative powers of the nexu were all too familiar to the Jedi. It would return to what remained of its titter when it awoke, a homecoming Jyl didn't want to be around for.

She grabbed Pandoor's collar and began dragging him to the cavern entrance, already reconsidering her promise of a good word to the Republic court. But she sighed, and grinned. Whatever else Jedi Knights did, they kept their promises.

"You're different, Jyl. You're special," she said, then she shook her head and laughed. "That line's older than Master Yoda!"

Before her she could see the mouth of the catacomb, and dawning daylight.

TWELFTH WEEK SUMMARY

Dagobah seems to resent our presence now.

Though we have cataloged as many different life-forms as possible, even imaging and documenting the plants and creatures we encounter have proved too much of an effort.

There is no answer yet from the Republic on additional support-staff or new equipment.

I am afraid we are not up to our assigned task. Morale is at its lowest point. Fights have broken out between some of the team members. Three of my companions are no longer speaking to each other.

Tension hangs in the air thicker than the mists.

Instead of doing our assigned research, we spend most of our days simply fighting off the encroaching jungle, maintaining our modular settlement against the constant onslaught of growing vines, creeping insects, and foliage that seems to charge forward every time we turn our backs.

The currents of the swamp change after every heavy downpour, often undermining the foundations of our sealed-off dwellings, labs, and storehouses. We have had to move camp twice in the past two weeks.

Today one member of the team died from an insect sting. In a separate file I have included images of her last convulsions, the remarkable purplish discoloration of her skin, and our utter helplessness. Our medicinal supplies did nothing to save her, and we could do nothing more than watch as she died. We buried her in the swamp, but I have no doubt that within days the various life-forms of Dagobah will have erased all signs of her grave.

I have sent message after message to the Republic government, explaining the wealth of possible medicinal discoveries the plants or insects of Dagobah have to offer, the opportunity for exotic pets or flora, the possibility of strange new drugs.

I have begged for assistance, but I have received only silence. Is some turmoil happening out in the civilized systems? Why would the Republic ignore us?

One week after the Battle Of Geonosis

Elusion Illusion

Aayla Secura suppressed a rising Sense of anxiety as she entered the council chamber high in the Jedi Temple. Jedi Master Mace Windu stood with his back to one of the arched windows that revealed an expanse of Coruscant cityscape. To the right of the doorway stood another Jedi sniffing at the petals of a flower placed in a wall niche. He was a Caamasi with long and supple limbs. Golden down covered his body, with purple fur masking his eyes and sleeping up in stripes to his crown.

Aayla bowed toward Mace Windu. "Forgive my lateness, Master."

At first, Mace nodded slowly, as if only distantly hearing her. Then he looked up at the Twi'lek and gave her a more certain nod, clasping his hands at the small of his back. Aayla felt a wave of serenity flow through the Force, from the Jedi Master to her. He said, "Though the war leaves us thinking that there's not a second to lose, you are not late. Right now, the portal of opportunity we're afforded is not yet closed."

He nodded to the other Jedi. This is Ylenic It'kla, a Jedi Knight of Caamas. He'll work with you on this particular assignment."

The Caamasi offered Aayla a slender hand, and she shook it. Ylenic held her hand firmly, but she knew he was exerting only a fraction of his strength. The fluid motion with which he had turned to greet her suggested speed and power that would make him a formidable warrior. With his long reach, Ylenic could be a deadly duelist if he were at all practiced with a lightsaber.

Aayla smiled at the Caamasi and looked back to Mace. "How am I to serve, Master Windu?"

"This is a delicate mission, Aayla, one that requires guile and intelligence, not just martial prowess. You have proven yourself with the latter at Geonosis."

"But the former, Master?"

"I have meditated on this matter, and you are the right choice."

"Yes, Master," said Aayla. She wondered what Windu was leaving unsaid, but she quelled the questions in her mind.

Mace nodded in acknowledgement of her discipline. "Corellia, due to the influence of Garm Bel Iblis, has declared itself neutral in the current conflict. Despite this stance, both the Republic and Confederacy of Independent Systems exert some influence on the world. Along with a few other neutral worlds, Corellia has become a haven for refugees from both sides."

Aayla raised one eyebrow as she grasped the implication. "And havens for those who would profit from trade with both sides?"

"Your knowledge of trading practices on fiylloth serves you well, Aayla." Mace smiled briefly before composing his face in a more serious expression. "In preparing for the war, the Techno Union started many development projects. Most of the researchers had little concept of how their work would be used, but one of them figured things out. His name is Ratri Tane. He stole his project's critical files and the only working prototype of some very valuable circuitry. He's sent his wife and child into hiding and he has made his way to Corellia. From there he seeks to hire transport to a place where he and his family can live in peace."

"Tane is from Corellia?" asked Aayla.

"No, Coruscant, though his wife was from Corellia - the city of Coronet." Mace ran a hand over his jaw. "We believe Tane stole the prototype and files as insurance in case the Techno Union found his family before his return."

Aayla nodded. "And you want us to find him and retrieve the files?"

"Yes," he said. "But it must be done quietly."

"Will we have any help from the Jedi on Corellia?"

Mace shook his head. "No, and that is why you must be careful. They have become somewhat territorial, and with the politics of the system being as complex as they are, this is understandable. When Corellia declared itself neutral in this conflict, loyalties within the Jedi there were split. Siding with the Republic might bring the war to the Corellian system, the system they've sworn to protect."

Aayla frowned. "But they are Jedi."

Ylenic opened a hand. "They are Jedi, and will defend the peace in their system."

"And if we need them to defend peace in the galaxy?" said Aayla.

Mace shook his head. That is a matter for later, Aayla. Your mission is to find Tane and extract him, Ylenic has been to Corellia before. The two of you will fly a smuggling ship, and you will be in command. You will be looking to move any number of cargoes, but will prefer passengers. To Tane, you will appear to be

the perfect escape from Corellia. Briefing files have already been loaded into your ship's computer."

Aayla smiled, much preferring the undercover role of a smuggler to being a slave dressed in too little to conceal a comlink, much less a lightsaber. "I've seen plenty of smugglers and seedy pilots. I can do this."

Mace nodded and held up a hand. "You can expect to find the Techno Union hiring a variety of criminals to find Tane. You must be especially wary of Gotal. Their horns make them sensitive to emotions and possibly even the Force. They are common among the criminals of Coronet, so watch for them."

"I understand," she said, growing excited at the prospect of this mission. Through the Force, she sensed both Mace and Ylenic react to her unchecked delight. She reined in that emotion and glanced down. "I shall be very careful, Master."

Mace nodded solemnly. "I know in you we've made the right choice."

Aayla settled into the co-pilot's seat in the cockpit of the Kuat Leisure I21-B modified yacht Flare. "Gear's all stowed. What do we have for a cargo?"

Ylenic punched a button on the command console. "Foodstuffs, mostly. Delicacies that ex-patriots can't live without. We'll get a good price for them."

She laughed. "Do you think the Jedi Council is much concerned about that? "

The Caamasi shook his head and punched the ignition control sequence into the ship's computer. The ship's twin turbines came online with a whine. Ylenic shunted power to the repulsorlift coils, and the ship floated delicately before rising into Coruscant airspace. They were departing from a commercial spaceport so they would attract little or no attention. Although Aayla did not like to dwell on the prospect, she was certain there were both mechanical and living spies watching the Jedi Temple and all other sensitive areas on Coruscant to transmit data to the Separatist leader Count Dooku - wherever he was.

Ylenic received clearance to leave the atmosphere, set the navigational computer for the prescribed outbound vector, and switched on the autopilot. The Flare left the angular streams of daily traffic behind, and soared past the highest towers to join a thin line of ships departing the Republic's capital. Aayla

watched the oilier ships, big and small, private and commercial, and even a few vessels with the distinctive red hulls denoting official Republic duty.

"How many of those ships do you figure are leaving on secret missions?" she asked.

The Caamasi smiled, "I would think, Aayla, that all of them carry secrets of one sort or another. Illicit operations, I would assume for most. A mission like ours? One or two, perhaps."

"You're probably right."

"Am I?" The Caamasi's amber eyes softened slightly. "How do you draw that conclusion? I am guessing without a shred of evidence - no sense of the Force, just idle speculation."

"It seemed correct to me." Aayla felt color rise to her cheeks and streak her lekku.

"This question should not be a cause of embarrassment, Aayla. The Force might well speak to you in ways it does not me."

She thought about that possibility as the ship made the transition from atmosphere to the daik cold of space. The Flare inverted, giving her a view of Coruscant's surface, especially the glowing lines and flickering lights of the night side. The sky lanes appeared like giant circuits with luminescent electrons moving along them. She picked one out and focused the Force on it, trying to receive some sense of its purpose. She felt nothing she could consider even the merest of impressions.

"Probably not the Force," she admitted, "but a guess on my part, too."

Ylenic smiled and scanned the computer readout, "At least we are guessing along the same lines. This bodes well for our effort. We are clear for the jump to hyperspace."

Aayla nodded and gave the order, "Go."

The Caamasi flicked two levers forward, engaging the hyperdrive. The ship lurched forward and the stars went from pinpricks to bars all pointed down

into a well that exploded up at them and filled the viewport with bright light. Aayla raised her hand to shield her eyes before the viewport dampers kicked in.

Ylenic nodded. "We will make the journey in four jumps. This course will add several hours over a direct trip, but it will mask our point of origin. It will also bring us into the Corellian system on a vector that is not much watched by pirates."

"Good thinking," she said dryly, "I would have suggested or approved that planning,"

Ylenic reached out with his right hand and patted her on the left shoulder. "Yes, Aayla, you are in charge of this operation, but as your pilot I sought not to bother you with this sort of tedious detail."

She gave him a quick smile and a nod. "I do wonder why Master Windu placed me in command."

"Do you?" The Caamasi canted his head to the side. "This means you doubt the wisdom of our Masters, or else you doubt yourself."

"Our Masters, no." She shook her head firmly. "But myself, yes, a bit. I am hardly the most experienced Jedi Knight in the galaxy, or even on this ship. You have been a Knight longer than I, so I wonder why I am not subordinate to you?"

This is simple: while I have been to Corellia before, I have filled a more traditional role. The Caamasi often counsel and mediate, and this is what I do most of the time. My skills as a pilot are likewise valued, but seldom have I spent time among the people we will meet while seeking Tane."

Ylenic's voice had strength, but it came quiet and warm. She liked listening to him, and watching his right hand move through the air as he spoke made his comments almost hypnotic. What he had said about the Caamasi was true, and they were highly valued for their skills. They were also known as pacifists and, try as she might, she could not remember ever seeing or hearing of another Caamasi Jedi.

Aayla commented on that fact, and Ylenic nodded as if expecting the remark. "It is true, we Caamasi have not produced many Jedi. It is also true that I am a pacifist."

"But here you are, willing to take part in a war," She frowned. "Doesn't that violate your philosophy?"

"There is a point at which pacifism, while seeming good, can serve the dark side."

"How can that be?"

His fingers extended, then half-curved back in on themselves, "There are those, especially within the Confederacy, who could characterize the Jedi as bloody-handed and aggressive warriors. Is that accurate?"

"No. Jedi are defenders of peace, counselors. We use our combat skills only as a last resort, only when forced to."

"Exactly. So, while we value peace and abhor violence, we know there is a point where we may have to place our lives between those of innocents and people who would harm them."

"Clearly."

"It is just as clear, Aayla, when pacifism becomes evil. If beings are capable of protecting others but refuse to take action to preserve their own sense of peace, they are being selfish. They place themselves and their sense of peace over the peace of others, and so they defend a philosophy instead of lives. In this way, they fail everyone. This is where their choice is evil."

She nodded slowly. To do nothing in the face of evil was to condone it and permit it to prosper, 'This Tane, then, is he being evil?"

Ylenic's face screwed up in concentration, and Aayla caught a quick sense of some emotion she couldn't identify.

"He is acting to save his family," said the Caamasi, "so I would think not."

She nodded. "What you say is wise."

The Caamasi nodded appreciatively. "I have a question, if you do not mind? Why do you doubt yourself?"

"I am young, I am inexperienced." She searched his face, looking for any sign in his amber eyes that these reasons rang true for him. She caught flickers through the Force, but nothing more. "This is a delicate mission. If it goes wrong, it might create a bad feeling with the Corellian government. They might see our effort as the Republic interfering in their affairs, and that might help ally them with the Separatists. That is quite a lot of responsibility to deal with."

"Good points, all." His eyes narrowed slightly, "Does it concern you that you have doubts?"

Aayla thought for a moment, then a moment longer. "No, I think it is good. I trust in my skills and training, but without doubts, without realizing that things could spin out of control, would become arrogant, a failing that could lead to the dark side."

"Very good, Aayla Secura." Ylenic smiled broadly. "Now you know why you are worthy of being entrusted with so important a mission,"

Both Aayla and Ylenic managed to sleep and meditate on the journey, so they arrived in the Corellian system refreshed and ready to act. A pair of security fighters looked them over as they came in past Selonia, but flight control cleared them on a vector for Corellia. The city of Coronet was just slipping into dusk as they landed at one of the myriad spaceports in the seaside city.

The lights had just begun going in the section of the town known as Treasure Ship Row. Aayla found that the place paled in comparison to Coruscant, but that could rightly be said of any other city in the Republic. Though there had been little in the way of cloud cover on the flight in, once Ylenic landed and popped the hatch, the city's humidity dragged at her.

Aayla shivered, 'This air just feels wrong.' Ylenic sniffed and wrinkled his nose, "It smells worse." They had chosen clothes that suited both their assumed roles and their personal preferences. For Ylenic this was a red kilt that ran to his knees, with small boots and a sleeveless blue jacket that buttoned to the throat and had long tails in the back. Over that he had thrown a black cloak that shrouded his form and let him easily conceal his lightsaber,

Aayla bound her lekku in a braid of black and brown leather strips that attached to her traditional Twi'lek headgear. Black boots came to her knees, and red - and black-striped leggings from there to her waist. A black and red tunic that was cut to expose to midriff and cleavage matched the leggings. While she took no great pleasure in revealing clothes, she knew such raiment was both unrestrictive in combat and distracting during trade negotiations. A black nerf-hide jacket cut short enough to reveal of band of blue flesh at her waist completed the outfit and let her conceal her lightsaber within easy reach.

A number of "commodities brokers" approached the ship and immediately began bargaining for the cargo. Aayla haggled with a pleasure that surprised her. She mentally split the lot and sold off each piece, pitting broker against broker. She refrained from using the Force to sway the brokers, but could sense avarice building as the bidding grew furious, and then panic rising as the prices became too dear. Within half an hour, she had disposed of everything at a tidy profit.

As she finished, Aayla noticed Ylenic talking to two of the brokers who had withdrawn from bargaining as they learned the Flare carried nothing in the way of serious contraband. She politely refused the offer of a drink with a flapping Toydarian and wandered over to join the Caamasi. The two shady brokers, a cloaked human and a Devaronian, acknowledged her with a nod before leaving.

Ylenic smiled at her. "You enjoyed yourself."

Aayla nodded but then froze for a moment. "I thought I had kept my emotions closed to the Force."

"You did, but you also smiled, and your victims were relieved when the bidding was over." He gestured casually in the direction of the retreating brokers. Those two asked what we were looking to take away with us, I suggested that while the hold was sufficient for almost anything, a yacht carries passengers better than cargo. Word will spread, and if Tane has been making inquiries, he will find us."

From the data files they'd received from Master Windu, Aayla knew they were looking for a human male of average height and weight, with green eyes, light hair, and a recently grown full beard. As humans went, he was not bad looking

and not very old. Still, there was something about him that seemed unlike a research scientist.

Then again, she mused silently, if he were nothing more than a typical dataworm, he never would have undertaken the theft or sent his family away to safety.

Ylenic pointed to one of the passageways heading north. "Our friends indicated that those who seek quiet passage off Corellia often look for opportunities at a cantina called Homestar. I suggested we would find our way there."

They headed out together, with Ylenic clearly shortening his strides to match her gait. Despite wearing a cloak, he moved quietly. If he weren't there at the edge of her vision, she might have thought he had vanished.

Losing him would have been easy, she thought, as they moved from the freight section of the spaceport to the passenger terminal. Throngs of people milled about—predominantly human and Selonian, but with enough Neimoidians, Devaronians, Weequays, Klatooinians, and even Bith to demonstrate what an important crossroads Corellia had become since the war began.

Aayla watched for Gotal and spied one lurking near a group of Neimoidians. She saw no other obvious dangers, and even from the Neimoidians she sensed no malevolence. She knew it was foolish to assume that every member of a particular species would be in lock-step with its leadership, but she decided to err on the side of caution and keep her senses open for potential enemies.

"I've spotted a Gotal," she whispered to Ylenic.

"There was a second." When he noticed her surprise, the Caamasi tapped his nose lightly. "They have a scent of old sweat and mildew."

"And I thought they looked bad."

They exited through another portal and turned east. The crowd thinned as they moved far from the spaceport. On the kilometer-long walk, the passages grew dim in a few spots, but they encountered no trouble. That didn't mean Aayla couldn't sense people lurking in the darkness, but she and Ylenic were judged by the cut of their clothes, so they aroused no special interest in the urban predators.

Treasure Ship Row-or simply "the Row," as natives seemed to call it-surprised her because of the cosmetic overlay of lights and signs. All were bright and kept in good repair. They gave the area an air of respectability, which she suspected was more to shield the establishments from the scorn of its commercial neighbor; than any fear of outrage from its visitors.

Homestar stood a quarter of the way along the Row, on the south side. It could have been mistaken for a planetarium on any other world. The music issuing forth might have dissuaded some from making that mistake, but otherwise the facade seemed plain. It did not excite the senses and, save for the odd collection of people coming and going, could have been described as unremarkable.

As Aayla and Ylenic entered the place, however, "unremarkable" gave way to "impossible." The doorway opened on a tall and wide set of stairs leading down into a round pit floor. A circular bar dominated the center, with concentric rings of round and curved tables spreading out around it. All around the walls and hanging from the ceiling were platforms and cages in which dancers undulated to the music. The band played on a stage directly opposite the stairs, and the area in front of their stage had been cleared for patrons to dance.

And dancing they were, in combinations of species that defied cataloging. And the manner in which they danced sent a shiver down Aayla's spine. She knew enough of the art to pass as a dancer, and she had a Twi'lek's delight in the sensuous movements a body can make. Those beings on the dance floor might well have been having fun, but to her eye they appeared to be writhing spastically as the result of some excruciating poison.

Ylenic shut his nostrils completely. "No, I do not like how they look, either."

The Caamasi led the way down to the floor and halfway around on the left. In the centermost of the table-rings they found a small space where they could stand. Ylenic moved around so he faced away from the bar, and she stood facing him, allowing them to cover the entire cantina. They punched in their drink orders on a small datapad built into the table. Soon a droid brought them two tumblers of Corellian whiskey, which they left untouched on the table.

As she studied people, Aayla could definitely see that Jedi on Corellia must have their hands full. The war had exacerbated the situation by bringing in a lot of beings under a lot of pressure-and adding to that mix agents of either side who wanted to cause trouble.

And if war came to this place: she shivered. Geonosis had been a wasteland before the battle, but the aftermath was still hideous. Droids blown into shards, Geonosians dead in droves, Jedi killed and hideously maimed. And the losses among the clone ranks were appalling.

Ylenic laid a hand on her forearm. "What is the matter?"

"Just remembering the first battle," she said.

Ylenic nodded. "It must have been terrible. While I would have gladly stood with my comrades, I am happy I do not carry memories of that event with me."

"There she is!" With a leathery slap of his wings, Lorfo, the Toydarian from the spaceport, landed on the edge of their table. "You were the best bargainer at the port, so I have a deal for you,"

She shot him a withering glance, but something beyond him caught her eye. Aayla tapped the back of Ylenic's hand. "To your right, fifty degrees. That's him, near the two Gotals,"

Ylenic looked and then nodded and breathed deeply. "I have him, and them. "

"I have a deal for you, pretty one." Lorfo repeated, chuckling. "Forget them. Their boss would have nothing for you."

Aayla frowned at Lorfo. "Not now." She moved past the Toydarian and started around the ring of tables on the outside. Ylenic mirrored her path on the inside.

The Gotals spotted Tane at the same time as the Jedi and started directly toward him. He saw them and spun, looking for an escape route.

Aayla felt someone grab her right shoulder, She twisted away and, without thinking, flicked her left hand at the Toydarian clinging to her. She gave him only a tiny push with the Force, but that was enough to bounce him back onto

their table, splashing their drinks onto a pair of Grans. The two aliens clinked all six of their eyes in surprise and grabbed Lorfo.

Aayla's action had alerted the Gotals. One continued after Tane, while the other drew a blaster and fired a shot at Aayla.

Time slowed for her even as she saw him reach for his weapon. As it slid from a well-worn holster and a thumb snapped the safety off, her right hand had disappeared into her jacket and grasped the silver cylinder of her lightsaber. She had it out and pointed down before he finished arming at her. When he hit the trigger, she ignited the blue blade and batted the scarlet bolt high, making it pass between two caged dancers,

The music swallowed both the whine of the first bolt and Lorfo's outraged cries, but the light of the second bolt scattered Homestar's patrons. Aayla had to deflect it high again, for if she missed in trying to direct it back at the shooter, she'd kill dancers or members of the band. The patrons' panic spread to the dancers, and the band faltered, save for the lone Dorenian Beshniquel player tearing off on a riff in counter-point to the whine of blaster bolts.

The bolts not only dispersed the crowd but showed the Gotals' allies the location of their foes. Fully alive in the Force, Aayla felt someone coming at her back. She spun, bringing the sizzling blue blade around and down through a wrist. The hand and the vibroblade it had been holding dropped away, accompanied by a hiss of pain. She clipped her attacker on the head with the blunt end of her lightsaber and slashed right, driving away another bolt.

She spun to follow her cut and dropped into a crouch to scythe the blade through the center post of a table. The gunman who had leaped upon it tipped and tottered, then pitched over. His blaster sprayed an arc of fire toward the ceiling as he went. With a minor thrust in the Force, Aayla pushed him into two others' ruffians, spilling the lot of them to the floor.

A Weequay leaped over the tangle of limbs and came at her with a truncheon held low in his right hand. His thumb hit a button, and the end of the weapon sparked as he thrust it at her. Aayla shifted onto her right knee and brought the blade up and over in a cut that sheered the truncheon in half. She ducked her shoulder, catching the Weequay in the stomach, and tossed him up and over in a somersault that toppled another table.

Panic and fear surged through the cantina, and in its wake came a near silence. Patrons and dancers had fled the building or crouched behind whatever cover they could find. Aayla glanced left and saw Ylenic, his cloak off, his green lightsaber gleaming. Around him lay a number of ruffians, all of them radiating enough pain for her to know they were alive and likely to stay that way.

Four humans pushed in against the tide of customers fleeing through the entrance. Three of them, two men and a woman, wore the green-and-black uniforms of CorSec officers. In their wake followed a tall man, quite slender, with black hair and cold gray eyes. He paused halfway down the stairs to take in the whole scene as his people rushed forward, drew their blasters, and leveled them at the Jedi.

Ylenic's blade vanished, and Aayla likewise extinguished hers. One of the CorSec officers put his blaster back in its holster and bent to check the one-handed man who had been wielding the vibroblade. He glanced back at his boss, got a nod, then produced a comlink and called for medical services.

The tall man approached Aayla and waved Ylenic over, "I am Inspector Rostek Horn of the Corellian Security Force. You are Jedi?"

Aayla hesitated for a moment, but before she could answer, Ylenic spoke. "Yes, Inspector, we are Jedi, passing through the system. We inquired at the spaceport where music and food might be had for weary travelers, and we were directed here."

Horn raised an eyebrow. "You are not dressed as Jedi."

Aayla nodded. "Given the neutrality of Corellia, we thought keeping our presence hidden would avoid creating unnecessary tensions."

"Unfortunately, Inspector, it did not,"

The Caamasi patted Aayla gently on the shoulder, "These individuals hoped my companion would wear something more revealing and dance for them. I was taken as harmless, since I am Caamasi."

Aayla opened her senses to the Force, trying to determine whether Ylenic was using a Jedi technique to influence the inspector's mind. He was not. She did know the ability to manipulate minds depended on the target's strength of

will. She suspected, quite strongly, that Inspector Horn would have been close to impossible to influence that way.

Mote CorSec officers arrived and began to gather the casualties. Horn studied those being hauled away in silence. He nodded. "This crew's caused trouble before. They're not going to tell us anything. There don't seem to be any other witnesses, so your version of events must be the truth."

He looked closely at Aayla. "Unless there's anything else you want to tell me?"

"Lot a thing, Inspector."

"Defending yourselves is not a crime, but I'll need to see your identification." He pulled a datapad from his pocket and began entering their information. "Have you communicated with the Jedi here?"

"No, Inspector." Aayla twitched her lekku in the equivalent of a shrug. "We wished to be no bother."

"That's probably best, then, to be no bother. You'll be leaving soon?"

Ylenic nodded. "Very soon, Inspector."

"Good. Don't let me keep you."

Ylenic took Aayla lightly by the elbow, but she gently freed herself and turned back to Horn, "Inspector, if you don't mind, a question?"

"Yes?"

"When you said they were a crew, you didn't mean they were from a starship, did you?"

"No, Small time hoodlums who hire out to whomever's being free with credits."

"And in this case?"

"I don't know who, yet, but I will." He smiled slowly. "You will be long gone by then."

"Of course we will, Inspector." Ylenic bowed gracefully. "A mere memory by then."

The Jedi left the cantina and cut through the crowd gathering around the medical transport. Already they heard stories of wholesale slaughter within the club. Aayla braced to hear the words "Jedi" and "Lightsaber" used, but most folks were recounting how they had narrowly been missed in a hail of blaster fire. Their role appeared to have escaped notice in the chaos.

Instead of heading back toward the spaceport, Ylenic walked farther east. His long-legged stride ate up the ground, and Aayla found herself trotting to catch-up. "Where are we going?"

"Away from there, I am seeking, perhaps in vain, a whiff of our quarry. Did you get anything?"

Aayla cast her mind back, sorting through recently perceived sensations, but she found nothing she could attach to Tane. She'd seen him, but she had not sensed him in the Force, and that surprised her. Given his situation, he should have been radiating anxiety with the intensity of a solar flare. "I got nothing."

Ylenic stopped, and his shoulders slumped. "I do not like this."

"Do we assume they have Tane?"

"He was spirited out quickly, or else he escaped and is being trailed. Either way, I think we have to assume he is in unfriendly custody."

"It's my fault this went bad, isn't it?" Aayla frowned. "I used the Force to flick Lorfo away, and that alerted the Gotals."

Ylenic took a deep breath in through his nose and snorted. "For you, the Force and telekinesis come easily, and you use them almost unconsciously. While what you did was a mistake, you were far more circumspect in how you dealt with your assailants. Had CorSec not arrived so quickly, we could have hidden our lightsabers and been away without anyone identifying us as Jedi."

"Except for the Gotals."

"Yes, the key point in it all. This is why time is now of the essence. Before we could lay out bait and wait for Tane to come to us, but now we must find him." Ylenic rested a hand on her shoulder. "Your question of Inspector Hotn was good, by the way, and I wish he could have shared useful information with us."

Something tugged at the back of Aayla's mind, but before she could focus on it, the dry flapping of wings and a grating voice drove it from her mind. "There's the pretty lady. She's a Jedi." Lorfo hung in the air and laughed. "I'm most impressed. She bargained without using her powers."

Aayla smiled as much in apology as in greeting. "Who would want to cheat an honest merchant?"

"If only I was one."

Her pale eyes narrowed. "Lorfo, you knew the Gotals. You know who they are working for."

"Yes, yes. I told you they would be no good for dealing."

"I need to find the Gotals and their boss, Lorfo. Do you know where they ate?"

"Well." The little winged creature rubbed a finger over his bulbous nose. "I am a merchant. I'll refund you ten percent on our previous deal."

"Twenty."

"Fifteen."

"Done!" His voice rose triumphantly, and he soared into the air. Roating down a bit awkwardly, he grinned and pointed down an alley heading south. "This way, not far, hurry."

The Jedi raced after the Toydarian. Their course soon turned west again, through rubbish-choked alleys that set Ylenic to sneezing. Aayla assumed the alley's miasma was for him the equivalent of blinding lights to her. Her sympathy for his discomfort only increased as she found the stench so revolting in a few places that she had to pinch shut her nose and breathe through her mouth.

Lorfo led them to a small warehouse with tall, heavy-duty shelving units crammed with duraplast crates. Lights burned deep in the warehouse's heart, and Aayla heard voices inside. She refrained from reaching out with the Force so she would not repeat the mistake she'd made at Homestar.

Turning, she pointed Lorfo back toward the door. "Thank you for your help. You don't want to be here if more trouble happens."

He darted down, kissed her hand, and gave her a wink. Spinning almost elegantly, he fluttered off low to the ground and, as quietly as possible, left the warehouse.

Aayla and Ylenic crept forward, slipping through tight spaces, peering around corners. She dearly wished she could use the Force to get a sense of her surroundings. Ylenic had been correct - sometimes using the Force came so naturally to her that she did so without a second thought. Now, not being able to without alerting any nearby Gotals, she felt blind.

They had crossed three-quarters of the way to the heart of the warehouse when two voices rose in the center of the building. One was clearly surprised, and the other shouted the first down, then let forth with a great laugh. As the echoes of its laughter died, the voice called out, "You Jedi might as well come in. Things are well outside your control. If you would like to see Ratri Tane live, I suggest you cease skulking about."

Aayla glanced at Ylenic, and he nodded, so they both straightened from crouches behind crates and walked forward. She kept her head up and covered her surprise as those gathered in the middle of the room came into view. She'd wondered how their presence had been betrayed, but the first creature she saw, hovering there, explained everything.

Lorfo shrugged with only a trace of embarrassment. "You should have given me twenty percent."

Beneath the hovering Toydarian stood four individuals. The two Gotals from Homestar pointed their blasters at the Jedi. Between them were Tane and a large, heavy-set man with a florid face, a bright shock of red hair, and freckles so thick they almost masked his eyes as effectively Ylenic's purple fur did his. He held Tane in front of him, with his left arm around Tane's throat and a blaster jammed into his ribs. A twitch of the trigger would broil Tane's heart.

The man smiled, revealing a tumble of teeth that made Lorfo's grin look like a work of art. "My name is Tendir Blue, and I'm actually pleased to see you. The Techno Union and its allies were willing to pay very well for Tane and the things he'd taken, but Count Dooku is exceptionally generous when Jedi are delivered to his keeping."

Aayla estimated the distance between her and the Gotals, knowing she could clear the seven meters in a leap. If she could keep herself from being hit by blaster bolts, she could cut them down and: arrive just in time to watch Tane collapsing with a smoking hole in his chest.

Blue punched his left thumb down on something that had been concealed in his fist. From above and behind Aayla, crates creaked open as six Trade Federation battle droids unfolded themselves. Their limbs straightened with a clatter, and their blasters oriented on the two Jedi.

The large Corellian smiled even more broadly and stated what Aayla already realized. "As you can see, it is quite impossible for you to do anything. Even if you were to cut down the Gotals, my droids would kill you, and I should certainly have killed Tane by then."

Aayla shook her head. "Kill him, and you don't get the prototype or the files."

Blue laughed and Tane looked crestfallen. "He was so eager to leave here, the silly man had the files and prototype on him. While my clients would love to have him in their possession, they have instructed me that his life is expendable. Will you have his blood on your hands?"

The Jedi remained silent.

The Corellian ground the blaster's barrel hard against Tane's ribs. "Your lightsabers. Slide them over here, slowly or, Tane dies."

Aayla glanced at Ylenic. He shook his head, opened his cloak, and withdrew his lightsaber held lightly between thumb and forefinger. The Caamasi stooped and slid the weapon to within a meter of the Gotals. Unable to think of an alternative, Aayla did the same. A Gotal picked up the weapons, and Blue nodded with satisfaction. "Very good. I am glad we can all be civilized about this. Lorfo, you shall be well rewarded..."

Then something odd happened. Aayla could still hear Blue speak, but his mouth moved out of sync with his words. A lightsaber sailed across the warehouse, and she snatched it from the air. As she ignited it and swung the silver blade around to ward off the droid's shots, she sensed Ylenic moving between her and the Gotals, protecting her back.

Then the vision faded. Ylenic still stood at her right. Her hands remained empty, and one of the Gotals snapped his head in Blue's direction. "The Force, they are using it,"

The Corellian groaned. "Stupid Jedi." Blue stroked the blaster's trigger. Smoke puffed from Tane's jacket. The man gasped and slumped. Blue let him fall to the floor.

Then almost exactly as it had been in her vision, a lightsaber flew across the room. She did snatch it from the air and ignite it. The battle droids started to focus on her, but she gathered the Force and launched herself into the air. She soared to the level of the highest droid, landed, and batted aside one bolt before she swept the blade through its middle and sent the pieces tumbling to the duracrete floor.

Aayla leaped away as more scarlet bolts chewed into the shelving and blasted other crates to melting shards. She landed in a crouch and cut the legs from beneath one of the droids. She reversed the blade and stabbed it through the chest of a second as she stood up. With a flick of her left hand, she dumped a third droid backward into the crate from which it had emerged.

A bit more of the Force lifted that crate and dropped it, dashing crate and contents on the floor.

Yanking the silver blade free of the pierced droid, Aayla spun and redirected a hail of bolts at the droids who fired them. Three shots hit one on the left side, spinning it about wildly before its legs tangled and it went down smoking. Yet another bolt took the head of the last one clean off. It stood there for a moment, then a gentle Force push dropped it backward, where it lay with limbs splayed and unmoving.

Aayla turned and looked at where the Gotals and Blue had been standing. Both Gotals writhed on the floor, their hands clutching painfully at their horns, Ylenic stood over them with his lightsaber burning brightly.

Blue was also down, his blaster in two pieces on the floor. Tane knelt beside him, his right hand on the man's forehead and his left hand wrapped around the hilt of Aayla's lightsaber.

Aayla thumbed the silver blade off and reversed the hilt.

"Your lightsaber? Thank you for the loan."

She floated the lightsaber over to Tane, who caught it in his right hand.

The man then stood, extinguished her lightsaber, and extended it toward her. "I would send this to you, but I am afraid it wouldn't get very far."

Aayla crossed to him and retrieved her lightsaber. "Who are you?"

The man held up one finger before bending and scooping up one of the Gotals' blasters. He flicked the selector lever to stun and pumped a blue bolt into each the horned ruffians. Their bodies bowed spasmodically and relaxed.

Ylenic rested his left hand on Tane's shoulder, "This is Jedi Master Nejaa Halcyon."

"What?" Aayla bowed her head. "I am honored, Master."

"I'm the one who is honored. You're a hero of Geonosis."

"I was there. Others were heroes." She looked at him and at Ylenic. "I couldn't get a sense of him in the Force because he was shielding his thoughts."

The Caamasi nodded. "He had to, or else the Gotal would have spotted him as a substitute,"

She frowned and her lekku shivered. "We were sent here on a mission to get Tane and not involve the Jedi guardians of Corellia. I don't understand. Was I included because Master Windu suspected I would be out of control enough to alert the Gotal? Clearly you wanted Blue to think Jedi were after you, so he'd

believe you were the genuine article. I was chosen not for my skill, but for my lack of experience."

Nejaa shook his head. "Actually, Aayla Secura, you are here because Master Windu thought you best for the job."

She snorted. "Anyone could have done what I have done."

"I would disagree." Halcyon clasped his hands together at his waist. "What we have accomplished here was rather complex."

"And, so far, done very well."

Aayla spun at the new voice and saw Rostek Horn entering the warehouse. "You knew about this place and this scheme?" She looked back over her shoulder at Ylenic. "And you are part of this conspiracy, too?"

"Don't forget me, pretty Jedi," Lorfo flapped down from the rafters. "I played a key role."

Aayla sighed and sat on a crate. "I didn't think gullibility was a trait for which Jedi were valued."

"That is not why you were chosen." Nejaa pointed at the wreckage of the droids. "Your combat skills were vital. Moreover, you are known as a hem of Geonosis. The Separatists watch for the Jedi it knows about, and Geonosis survivors come high on their list. Lorfo was able to spot you, to draw attention to you at Homestar. That's why Blue's people were close to you when the shooting started - which it would have done regardless of how you reacted, to keep you occupied while they got me. I had on me a small tracking device, but it failed to work. Had you used it to find me, Lorfo would have betrayed you to Blue as he did, but without guiding you here first. When Ylenic discovered he could not track me with the locator, Lorfo flew up to lead you."

She shook her head. "So, Lorfo keeps them looking at us, so they won't realize you're not really Tane. We were the misdirection."

Ylenic smiled. "More correctly, we all are misdirection. You and I, here, for Blue, yes; but this whole operation as well."

Aayla's lekku twitched and she nodded. "While the Confederacy is looking here for Tane, he's already off being relocated. And that would mean the files and prototype are flawed."

"They are." Nejaa nodded solemnly. "Not hopelessly, though, just a hasty attempt at sabotage. Techno Union scientists will repair the damage, but Tane is willing to prepare counter-measure products that will render the new droids less than effective. The entire Separatists' effort to retool factories and produce a new generation of battle droids will be futile."

He pointed to the robotic carnage Aayla had left behind. "Those droids and the fact that Dooku is paying for captured Jedi likely will not be enough to sway the Corellian government to throw in with the Galactic Republic. On the other hand, they should be enough to show the other Jedi in this system that the evil of the Clone Wars is at hand. I hope it will free us to act with the rest of the Jedi."

Aayla pointed at Halcyon's jacket. "Blue shot you at point blank range. Why aren't you dead?"

Halcyon shrugged. "The Halcyons are weak when it comes to telekinesis. We are good at broadcasting visions, however. Hence, you saw my message. We also have a rare ability. With preparation, we can absorb a fair amount of energy. We have to bleed it off somehow, so I used it to send my lightsaber to you-as I could not normally have done."

As he finished speaking, he held up his left forearm and slipped the lightsaber into the sheath hidden there, "Tearing yours away from the Gotal would have been a bit much for me to do and get a blade to you quickly."

The Twi'lek looked over at Ylenic. "What did you do to the Gotal?"

He smiled. "You'll recall the alley stench was overwhelming?"

"Yes."

The Gotal pick up on things like the Force through their horns. I simply used the Force to hit them with its version of the stench."

Aayla winced. "Neat trick."

Ylenic's smile broadened.

"So, how much of all this did Master Windu know? I caught no deception from him."

The Caamasi opened his hands. "Nejaa is an old friend. When Tane reached Corellia and this plan began to form, Nejaa asked me to act as a liaison between him and the Jedi Council. The Jedi getting Tane and his family to safety are not from Coieliia. They are acting under Master Windu's orders."

Nejaa nodded. "Of internal Corellian Jedi politics, he knows about as much as anyone does on Coruscant."

Inspector Horn smirked. "That's likely as much as anyone here knows about it, too."

Nejaa shook his head, and Aayla sensed a strong bond of friendship between the two men. "Nothing could send us over to the Confederacy, so the chance of finding something to win us over to the Republic's fight was one worth taking. You were not told everything, so your reactions would be natural and read true to anyone watching."

"I don't like it, but I understand. There is something else I need to know, however." Aayla thought for a moment and narrowed her eyes. "Your intention is to implant a memory in Blue that he will carry off to his masters, and that will verify that the data and prototype are the real thing?"

"That's the plan."

"That may be the plan, Master Halcyon, but I am willing to bet that Count Dooku will sift through his mind, and things will unravel from there."

Ylenic canted his head to the side. "Her point is a good one."

Nejaa nodded. "Agreed, but I'm not sure I see a good fix."

"Don't worry." Aayla boosted herself off the crate. "I know just what will do the job."

Tendir Blue drifted back to consciousness as Lorfo tugged on his left arm. The man had slumped against the wall in a passageway in the spaceport. The Toydarian's breath came heavy and sour, his words rushed and full of panic.

"Get going. Now! She's still coming after you."

Blue shook his head to clear it. He raised a hand to his forehead, where fingertips brushed over the wound from a glancing blaster bolt. What happened?

"Who's coming, Lorfo?"

"The Jedi!" The winged creature's eyes grew wide. "The Jedi you didn't kill."

Tendir scrambled to his feet and patted his pockets. He had datacards and the prototype of the chip. Those things he remembered. He added to that the memory of shooting Tane. After that, blackness, nothing - must be amnesia from the bolt.

He looked around and recognized his surroundings. This way, to my ship."

"I know. I called and it's pre-flighted."

The Toydarian fluttered in front of him.

"You owe me."

"Yes, yes, you'll be paid."

"Paid, no. Get me off this rock."

Pain throbbed through the man's head.

"What happened?"

"Everything, There was shooting and lightsabers-and the gold Jedi, he died. Your Gotal, your droids, gone. She is hurt, but you stumbled out."

"I helped."

The Toydarian's voice rose to a shriek. There she is!"

Blue took one glance behind him. He saw her in the tunnel, illuminated by the azure light of her lightsaber. She dragged her left foot, and he could hear her rasping breath. She slumped against the wall but pointed her lightsaber at him.

"You won't escape me, Tendir Blue!"

She gestured with her left hand and Lorfo squealed. His fingers clawed at the shoulder of Blue's coat, and the man could feel the Jedi tugging at the little Toydarian with the Force. He tried to keep going, but Lorfo's grasp kept him anchored to the spot.

"Help me, Blue!"

"If it's you she wants..." The man smashed a fist down on Lorfo's hands. "She can have you."

Another blow broke his grip, and the Toydarian flew back to slam into the Jedi. Both of them went down in a tumble, and Tendir sprinted forward. He cut through the crowd, knocking people left and right as he ran to his ship. Once inside, he sealed the airlock and lifted off. As he urged his ship forward, he saw the Twi'lek Jedi enter the hangar bay. She gestured at him, and he slewed the ship around, letting his turbine exhaust knock her back into the tunnel.

With a laugh, Tendir Blue pointed his ship to the stars.

Ylenic helped Aayla up. "You are unhurt?"

"My pride is wounded," she said, "but I'll live." She brushed her backside off and used the Force to call her lightsaber to hand and tucked the weapon inside her jacket again. "I think he believes you're dead and that he just barely escaped. Dooku can sift his mind all he wants. Amnesia explains the lack of memory of the fight, and his fear will confirm the 'truth' of what he says happened here."

Nejaa and Inspector Horn came up, with Lorfo hovering behind them. The Corellian Jedi nodded, "And he thinks Lorfo was apprehended by you, so he will not suspect he was really working for us all along. A neat and tidy package."

"As it should be, Master." Aayla smiled. "After all, tying things up that way must be why I was put in charge of this mission, don't you think?"

THE BATTLE OF GEONOSIS

22 B.B.Y.

Author: Obi-Wan Kenobi

At the request of the Jedi Council, I make this report of my confrontation with Count Dooku on Geonosis. I confess, I'm at something of a loss about where to begin. What started as a mission to trace the origin of a Kamino saberdart has led to the death of many Jedi and, even worse, interstellar war.

It seems the seeds for the battle on Geonosis were planted at least a decade ago. Actually, I'm not sure if planted is the right word. Strewn seems more accurate, yet strewn with apparent precision in a star system that someone didn't want us to know existed, like some cosmic sleight of hand that...

Please forgive me. My thoughts went to my Padawan, who lost a hand on Geonosis. He's with the surgeons now. I'll continue.

As you know, I traced the saberdart to Kamino, despite the fact that all records of that star system were wiped from the Jedi Archives. To reiterate my report from Kamino, the Kaminoans maintain that Master Sifo-Dyas placed the order for a clone army at the request of the Senate almost ten years ago. I recalled that Sifo-Dyas was killed around that time, so it seems possible that the Kaminoans dealt with an imposter. According to the Kaminoans, Sifo-Dyas also requested that

they keep his involvement a secret until a Jedi arrived to claim the clones, and to expect the arrival of the clone host. The clone host was the bounty hunter Jango Fett, and the Kaminoans introduced us. Fett claimed he'd been recruited not by Sifo-Dyas, but by a man named Tyrannus on one of the moons of Bogden. I quickly assessed that Fett was the same hunter who had fired the saberdart that led me to Kamino in the first place.

Fett attempted to escape me on Kamino, but I followed him to Geonosis, where I discovered Count Dooku meeting with the Separatists about combining their forces. After transmitting a message to Anakin, I was captured by the Geonosians and briefly interrogated by Dooku. He was very charming, made it seem like an interview, even though I was trapped in a force field at the time.

Dooku told me that the Republic is under the control of a Dark Lord of the Sith called Darth Sidious. He said that Sidious was once in league with the Trade Federation but betrayed them ten years ago, which is the same year as the Battle of Naboo. Dooku claimed the Trade Federation sought help from the Jedi Council, but they were ignored. He asked me to join him and destroy the Sith.

Obviously, I refused. I sensed the dark side in Dooku. The rest you know better than I: how Anakin relayed my message about the droid armies, how Jedi reinforcements traveled to Geonosis, and how Chancellor Palpatine was granted emergency powers to utilize and activate the clone army. I take no comfort in acknowledging that the Jedi would have lost the battle at Geonosis had the clone troops not arrived when they did.

Count Dooku told me that our vision has become clouded by the dark side of the Force. As Master Yoda will attest, Dooku is himself strong with the dark side, and it may be impossible to unravel any truth from his claims. Still...

Perhaps I have become too much of a detective, but I find myself preoccupied by so many references—if not facts—related to events of “ten years ago.”

A Sith Lord named Darth Sidious betrayed the Trade Federation.

Sifo-Dyas commissioned the clone army.

The mysterious Tyranus recruited Jango Fett as a genetic template for the clone army.

Sifo-Dyas was killed.

And Count Dooku left the Jedi Order. All ten years ago.

I suspect that only a Jedi—possibly Sifo-Dyas or Count Dooku—could have

erased the Kamino system from the Archives. It seems highly likely that this deed was done at a time consistent with the other noted events. Sifo-Dyas strikes me as a more likely suspect if only because I can't imagine why Dooku would have taken measures to build a secret army for the Republic, then allow that army to attack his own forces on Geonosis.

What disturbs me most of all is that the Kaminoans were expecting a Jedi to arrive when I did, as if everything was going according to plan. Could it be that my finding the saberdart was also part of this plan? And sending the clone troops to Geonosis? I thought the Force was guiding me, yet now I wonder whether I was an unwitting pawn in some decade-old scheme.

I will not wonder much. Dooku has caused the death of many Jedi, and must be stopped.

Galactic Battlegrounds: Clone Campaigns

The Hunt for the Decimator is the historical name given to the campaign against Confederacy of Independent Systems General Sev'rance Tann, led by Jedi Master Echuu Shen-Jon.

The campaign began almost simultaneously with the Clone Wars. Echuu was first drawn to fight Sev'rance after his pupil, Stam Reath, was struck down by the general during the First Battle of Geonosis.

Shortly after this, Sev'rance led a campaign that resulted in both the capture of the Galactic Republic's secret weapon, the Decimator, from the research facilities on Eredenn and the stealing of the activation codes for the machine from Alaris Prime.

Using the weapon, Sev'rance took the world of Sarapin, killing Jedi Knight Jor Drakas and sending shockwaves throughout the entire Republic. To deal with this grave threat, Jedi Master Mace Windu dispatched his new Padawan Echuu Shen-Jon, Naat Reath, and a battalion of clone troopers to recapture Mount Corvast, the prime energy collection facility on Sarapin. General Echuu was successful in this battle, proving himself to be a tactical planner on par with Sev'rance.

From Sarapin, Echuu led his forces in pursuit of Sev'rance, eventually tracking her to Krant. There, he seized a Trade Federation facility on one of the moons of Krant, which was to be used as a staging ground for his invasion of the planet. However, Naat Reath was captured by Sev'rance, and Echuu began to descend further into the darkness that had been growing within him since the death of Naat's brother.

Pursuing Sev'rance to Krant itself, Echuu fought his way through several large Separatist bases, taking the Decimator facilities and reaching the stronghold of Sev'rance herself. The Separatist general issued an ultimatum—Echuu would fight her alone, or Naat would be terminated. Echuu accepted the challenge and succeeded in defeating Sev'rance, putting an end to the campaign. Echuu bade Naat return to the Jedi Council, while he himself went into exile.

THIRTEENTH WEEK SUMMARY [Final Entry]

Our carefully protected food supply has begun to spoil, and this causes me greater fear than any of the previous disasters that have befallen us.

The tenaciously adapting life-forms of Dagobah have found ways to breach even our most careful seals. Much of our work now centers on finding edible plants and animals in the swamp around us, simply in order to survive.

Two more dead this week: one torn apart by a large, unseen predator, one dead from a poison plant. This latter death distresses me the most—according to all our analysis, the plant should have been edible, even nutritious. And yet it was deadly. At least the poison was fast-acting. I will have to remember it if...in case our situation becomes untenable.

I have sent out a broad-spectrum distress signal.

Soon we will have to eat the native plants and hunt animals for our own food. Only five of us remain.

But we have all been highly trained. I have every confidence that we can survive.

[Editor's Postscript—By the time a passing spice freighter responded to the distress signal and shuttled a rescue party down to the location of the research station, the entire team had disappeared. The modular buildings had been partially dismantled by the encroaching swamp and large animals. Some of the domes had caved in from the weight of clinging vines; all the team's food supplies had been devoured.]

The would-be rescuers collected all the data records they could find, then left the abandoned station. No sign was ever found of Halka Four-Den or the remaining members of her research team.

It seemed the Republic had forgotten all about them. With the corruption, disorder, and decay of the cumbersome old government, this was unfortunately not an unusual occurrence. We have found numerous "lost archives" in the databases on Coruscant, many telling sadly similar stories.

Though some of the Dagobah records were damaged by exposure to the harsh environment, the Republic archives still retain volumes and volumes of information on the life-forms observed and recorded by Halka Four-Den.

Other expeditions to Dagobah have been proposed, usually halfheartedly, but each one was rerouted or canceled at the last minute. Many library records have been garbled or misfiled, as if mere mention of the swampy planet is cause to draw a blanket of mystery around it. The system has been missed on any number of other surveys, records lost, coordinates mixed up. Even veteran space navigators have rarely heard of it. We hope this article will rekindle interest in the world of Dagobah. The swamp planet has made itself terribly elusive...a perfect place to hide, as if something on the swampy world does not want to be found.]

The Clone Wars

One month after the Battle of Geonosis, and shortly after the siege of Rhen Var, the Republic detects unusual activity on Raxus Prime, and sends a strike force led by Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi to investigate the activity.

On arrival, Anakin and Obi-Wan begin to scout out the area on the planet's surface. After they take out an enemy scout party, they discover an enemy excavation site and contact their assault ship for reinforcements.

Anakin and Obi-Wan make an attack on three supply convoys to stall for time so their strike force can land. Once the strike force lands, they fight their way to the excavation site, hampered by traps and surprise attacks. Eventually, they reach the excavation site, where there is a second group of Republic forces lying in wait. They destroy the shield generator, allowing the second strike team to enter the battlefield. Both teams simultaneously attack and destroy the remaining defenders, as well as the excavation cranes' fuel lines.

As the battle winds down, Anakin spots Count Dooku escaping in a *Hardcell*-class interstellar transport and pursues him. Once the Union ship lifts off, the Confederates unleash their deadly assault machine, the Protodeka. The Protodeka destroys the entire Republic strike force. Obi-Wan single-handedly destroys the war machine, but by the time reinforcements arrive, Dooku's ship has already left the system with Anakin and part of the Dark Reaper.

After his encounter with Count Dooku on Raxus Prime, Anakin Skywalker is captured and sent to Alaris Prime, the Kashyyyk moon, to be executed. Skywalker and the other prisoners, including the mercenary Bera Kazan, are doomed to be killed by the Force Harvester, an ancient Sith weapon that drains the Force from all living things within its range. Using the Force, Anakin is able to break free from his cell, along with Bera. After freeing the other prisoners they escape on stolen Single Trooper Aerial Platforms. Moments later, the Harvester becomes fully charged and begins absorbing power from the moon's forest. Anakin and Bera navigate through the moon's forest to escape from the Harvester's blast radius. Eventually, they pass through a small Wookiee village

(it is up to the player, whether to alert them of the danger coming their way), and the Force Harvester's power starts to recede.

Anakin and Bera retreat to a hidden Wookiee village where they learn that the CIS has jammed all planetary communications. Together they devise a plan to contact the Republic. Using a stolen Armored Assault Tank, Anakin and Bera infiltrate a CIS communication outpost and sent a distress signal to the Republic. Shortly afterwards the CIS attack the single remaining Wookiee village on the moon. With the use of traps, Anakin and Bera are able to block enemy reinforcements coming in through the canyons. However, they are unable to set up traps north of the village where the bulk of the enemy's army is entering. They are forced to hold off the enemy until the Republic fleet arrives. During the battle, Republic forces (with Obi-Wan in charge of the attack) arrive and are able to chase off the CIS army. Anakin and Obi-Wan trace the army back to its source: a Separatist dropship called the *Harbinger*. Together they destroy the Harbinger, severing the endless flow of CIS war machines. Bera survives the battle but her fate is unknown. The forests were reduced to waste by the Force Harvester and the multiple battles, forcing the native Wookiees to leave and find a new home.

When Anakin and Obi-Wan return to their headquarters, they report the happenings on Alaris Prime to Yoda and Mace Windu. Windu reveals to Anakin and Obi-Wan that during the Great Sith War, the enemy constructed a weapon so powerful that no one could withstand it. It was called the Dark Reaper, and it required tremendous amounts of energy to function. The Force Harvester gathered the required energy for the Reaper, allowing it to work. Mace also reveals that one Jedi, Ulic Qel-Droma, learned how to withstand the Reaper's effects. He taught others how to do it also, and the Republic was able to defeat the Dark Reaper. Droma's tomb is located on Rhen Var, and anyone who goes there will be taught how to defeat the Reaper. Obi-Wan and Anakin prepare a strike force to retake Rhen Var.

Although still a minor planet in terms of strategic strength, the tomb of Ulic Qel-Droma on Rhen Var is vital to destroy the Dark Reaper. As a result, Obi Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker launch a massive assault on the planet with Skywalker fighting in the air and Kenobi on the ground. The sheer force of the

attack overwhelms the Confederates and Obi-Wan is able to lead his forces to the temple. At the temple, Anakin is met with Spectral Guardians guarding Qel-Droma's tomb. He defeats them and finds Droma's tomb, where he learns how to withstand the effects of the Dark Reaper for a short time. The attack on Thule, the location of the Dark Reaper, is divided into four phases. Anakin Skywalker and his strike force take out the planetary shield on the Thule moon, Sivvi. This allows Obi-Wan Kenobi to perform an aerial attack on significant strategic locations across Thule in a Low Altitude Assault Transport. He destroys the Communications Installation to cripple the Separatists' communications. Mace Windu then commands the ground forces around Thule's capital city of Kessia. Upon his arrival, Cydon Prax destroys Mace Windu's TX-130 *Saber*-class fighter tank. Mace Windu is forced to travel on foot to open the gates to the Sith Temple. Finally, Anakin Skywalker and his strike force enters the Sith Temple. Skywalker then single-handedly kills Cydon Prax, allowing him to press forward. Because Anakin is the only commander who is immune to the effects of the Dark Reaper, he re-defeats the Dark Reaper with only Qel-Dromas's guidance. However, the knowledge he gained from Ulic Qel-Droma causes him to act more arrogantly towards Obi-Wan. He takes another indirect step towards the path to the dark side of the Force.

Three Months after the Battle Of Geonosis

The Pengalan Tradeoff

The bang beneath his feet was strong enough to bounce Joram Kithe up onto his tiptoes. He came down off-balance and was afraid that he'd pitch out the open starboard side of the gunship, onto the rocky terrain rolling by at five hundred kilometers an hour. But the vehicle's inertial compensator kept its grip on him, restoring his balance.

Joram glanced at the other men in the troop hold. Most were staring out the starboard access, There weren't as many as there had been four hours ago, when the gunship, part of the complement of the assault ship *Sea Legacy*, had set down on Pengalan IV. Then, they'd been a full platoon-plus Joram. Now,

there were perhaps fifteen left, men with heat-scarred clone trooper armor, expended ammunition clips, injuries ranging from minor to life threatening.

Not that they complained. Clone troopers didn't complain. At least, they didn't in the presence of observers.

The platoon's lieutenant, his armor distinguished by the blue stripes of his rank, leaned back through the hatch that led into the forward compartments. His voice crackled through Joram's headset. Joram pressed the headset tighter to his ears; he was in civilian dress, so he didn't have a helmet to cut down on the sound made by the wind.

"Our comlink is damaged," the lieutenant said. "Sea Legacy is still not receiving us. But we're receiving them. We'll reach them in time for extraction."

"What was that last bang?" Joram asked.

"Missile impact from a ground station." The lieutenant's tone suggested that he was unconcerned. "The warhead didn't detonate. The pilot says the impact changed our performance characteristics. Either an engine is failing or the missile is still protruding from our underside, increasing drag."

"Wonderful."

Scuttlebutt aboard Sea Legacy had it that the last transmission of a Republic Intelligence agent on Pengalan IV reported that Count Dooku's Confederacy was set up here, manufacturing experimental diamond boron missiles designed to shoot down Republic starfighters. These missiles could tip the balance of power toward the Confederacy in this new war. Sea Legacy's sensors had shown a longdecommissioned manufacturing plant, the world's most significant industrial site, to be operational, its furnaces fired up and internal machinery working ... and its exterior protected by shield projectors that were distinctly inappropriate for a civilian industry. So, four hours ago, the assault ship had set down on the planet's surface and its scores of gunships had deployed toward the facility.

The platoon Joram was assigned to was one of the advance forces. Its gunship had set down within walking distance of the facility an hour before dawn. The platoon, separated into squadrons, had gone on foot to the plant,

silently scouted the site, found the points where the overlapping shields gapped to allow plant workers easy access, and communicated its findings to the rest of the troops. Demolitions experts from an engineering unit had arrived and crept into the site, planting their explosives, getting clear, setting them off -

Certainly, the shields had gone down. Certainly, the Republic gunships had roared in to finish the job. But everything had gone wrong.

The shields had sprung to life again. Joram, from his position of relative safety near the gunship, had watched in disbelief as missiles and turret lasers had stopped mid-flight, blunted by shimmering air. The foremost gunships, too close to maneuver, had crashed into those energy barriers, crumpling or exploding.

Joram, although no soldier, hadn't needed a military advisor to grasp what was happening. The shield projectors destroyed by the engineers had been secondary projector terminals slaved to complete units elsewhere on the facility. It was a trap, and the trap was fully sprung when the pair of Geonosian-built corvettes-bronze-skinned, with a pointed prow split like a set of tweezers, characteristic of the Geonosian engineers-rose from one of the world's numerous canyons and opened fire. Trade Federation droid starfighters had roared in, strafing.

It had been a slaughter. Gunship after gunship had gone down.

In the Republic forces' retreat, Joram had seen acts of bravery and skill he considered extraordinary. Some of the combat engineers who had destroyed the false shield projectors had penetrated deeper into the facility; before being killed, they reported that there were no missile fabrication systems here, just machinery activated to provide distant sensors with a suspicious signal to detect. Gunship pilots had swooped down to make daring rescues of clone troopers. Whole units remained behind to provide covering fire for escaping craft. The retreat was not as orderly as the approach had been, but it was nearly as efficient.

Ironically, Joram's personal mission had been a success. He'd seen the troops operating at the height of chaos and had found them to be courageous and effective, everything the Republic could hope for in its new army. He thought he had enough data for his report.

Another impact hurled Joram upward, snapping him back to the here-and-now. This time he crashed into the ceiling of the troop bay and was held there, sharp pain cracking through his head. In his peripheral vision, he saw the aftmost portion of the bay filled with blinding brightness that consumed the trio of troopers who had been standing there.

The landscape outside the starboard access was rotating, a dizzying vision like something from an amusement facility's thrill ride. Distantly, dimly, he heard someone shout, "Eject! Eject!"

"Negative, we can bring it in-"

"Initiating uncontrolled touchdown procedures." Finally, most ominous of all: "Brace for impact."

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Joram awoke with the sun in his eyes.

It seemed that all his eighty kilos of mass had just spent hours being tenderized by a chef. Where he didn't ache, he cramped, and his first, foolish attempt to sit up caused his back to arch in a spasm that nearly made him black out again.

"Civilian's awake."

"Good."

Joram didn't know which clone was speaking; he couldn't recognize their voices. Actually, that wasn't true-but they all had the same voice. They pitched their voices differently for different situations-louder and deeper when exerting authority or dominance, quieter when acknowledging orders, a sort of bland neutrality when seeking to conceal their thoughts-but every one of them sounded the same.

Joram merely grunted, and as the spasm ebbed, he tried again to sit up, this time using his arms for support. it worked and he came upright.

Forty meters or so ahead of him lay the ruins of the gunship. Once a long boxy thing with stabilizing wings, it now looked like something a giant had drunk from and then crumpled into a loose ball. It lay at the bottom of a cliff, and Joram could see a corresponding cliff about a hundred meters to his left. They'd crashed into one of Pengalan's numberless canyons.

He could see living clone troopers nearby, at the wreckage and beyond. Joram counted six of them. Good. He could still count. Counting was what he was good at. The troopers had laid out the bodies of their fellows in a straight line only a few steps from where Joram sat. Some of the survivors were picking among the gunship ruins; others were ranging farther down the canyon or using field shovels to dig graves nearby.

The gravediggers had their helmets off, revealing identical features -- dark, brooding, dangerous-looking. Joram had been put off by their looks until he'd realized just how passive most of them were when not engaged in battle. "What's our situation, Trooper?" Joram asked the nearest.

The trooper straightened from his task. He was a moment in replying. The clone troopers always seemed to take a moment when answering Joram, or any civilian.

"Seven of us still alive," the trooper answered. "Plus you. One has damage that will limit his mobility. The gunship's a loss. All weapons systems out. Repulsorlifts inoperable. Speeder bikes wrecked. Medical droid destroyed."

"Or so we think," the other gravedigger corrected. "We can't get to the compartment where it was stowed, but it was pretty thoroughly crushed."

Joram managed to get to his feet and stood on wobbly legs. "Is anything still working?"

Both men nodded in unison. "The inertial compensator," said the first one. "It can still run off battery power. It's what kept us alive during the crash. And during the roll down the cliff." With his shovel, he gestured up the cliff side. Fifty meters up there was a clear burn mark to indicate where the gunship had hit.

"Did the lieutenant make it?"

The first gravedigger shook his head.

"Who's in charge, then?"

Both troopers shook their heads. "We're still working that out, sir," the first said. "There are only troopers left. The procedures say that the oldest has seniority, but we're all the same age. We then default to the trooper with the highest educational level, but no one has a clear advantage there."

The second gravedigger summed up: "So we drew strands."

The first gravedigger turned to Joram. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you."

The trooper held his shovel out to Joram, handle first. "Then dig."

Joram frowned. "I don't think so."

The trooper smiled. "All of us are banged up, so you can't opt out on account of physical condition. We're military, and you're a civilian, But we won't do it if we don't have to. If we don't, though, it doubles so under these circumstances you're attached to us in an inferior our travel time." capacity. Dig."

Joram reached under his tunic and pulled out the object held on the chain around his neck. It was an oversized locket bearing the Republic insignia - a symbol like a cross-section of a gear with eight sprockets, surrounded by a dotted line. Joram popped it open and presented the datacard held within it. On the card's surface was a holo of Joram's face; below that were lines of information. "Sorry, guys. I'm temporarily a lieutenant with Republic Intelligence. Meaning I can opt out on account of rank."

Both troopers snapped to a salute. The one who'd been holding out his shovel dropped it and winced as it hit the ground.

"Uh, as you were, I guess." Joram waited until the second gravedigger retrieved his shovel. "So which one is the guy in charge?"

The first digger gave him a curious look. "That would be you, sir."

"Uh, no. This identicard just means I'm outside your command structure."

"No, sir. You're a military officer. We're a military unit without an officer. That puts you in charge. That's procedure."

"Great." Joram heaved a sigh. "Back to my original question. Which one of you was in charge until just a moment ago?"

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They summoned another trooper, indistinguishable from the rest, and at Joram's request, he explained their situation. "The Sea Legacy has to have lifted, sir, so we're stranded on Pengalan IV. Procedure gives us two branching paths to choose between. The goal of the first is surrender; the second is escape. I was going to set us down the escape path."

"I like the sound of that," Joram said. "I'm a career coward. So what do procedures dictate that we do?"

"Step One: Destroy any materiel we don't want to fall into enemy hands. I've got one of the men rigging a warhead in the wreckage now. Step Two: Time allowing, bury our dead." The trooper nodded toward the line of graves. "Step Three: Get clear of pursuit. Step Four: Signal our command structure. Since we can't, we go down a new branch. Step Four-Sub-One: Get to a transportation center and acquire a means to rejoin our unit."

Joram nodded. "Pretty straightforward. How soon is pursuit likely to get to us, and how far is it to the nearest transportation center?"

"Pursuit, unknown. There's a trooper at the cliff top with a pair of macrobinoculars watching for incoming vehicles. Distance, about a hundred kilometers back to the assault site, which is likely to be loaded with unfriendlies, and a little more, about a hundred and twenty clicks, to the nearest inhabited community, Tur Lorkin."

Joram thought about that. "Let's say we chose Tur Lorkin. That's still three or four days marching through hot, difficult terrain."

"More than that, sir, unless we sacrifice our injured man. Let him be captured or put him down ourselves. He can't walk."

"Put him down." Joram winced at the cold-blooded terminology. "How do you feel about the prospect of putting him down, trooper?"

The trooper looked uneasy. "If we have to, it's his duty, and ours, sir. But we won't do it if we don't have to. If we don't, though, it doubles our travel time."

"I have an idea," Joram said. He described it.

The trooper frowned. "Sir, that's not approved procedure."

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Joram lay in the shade under an overhang of rock, peering down at the wreckage of the gunship. He held a clone trooper blaster rifle.

He wished he could have appropriated a set of trooper armor, too, but he was centimeters taller than the troopers, narrower in the shoulders, leaner overall. Even his face was leaner and more angular, with features that were friendlier, less intimidating. The form-fitted trooper armor would chafe in some directions, be loose in others, and make him awkward while walking.

Below, all signs that there had been survivors had been erased all but the presence of a clone trooper, backing away from the wreckage, using a handful of vegetation to erase footprints from the sand-like canyon soil. That trooper had reactivated the wreckage's inertial compensator, a power surge that nearby Confederacy sensors should be able to detect.

The shallow graves had been smoothed over by the gravediggers. The armor belonging to the dead, now empty, was strewn about the wreckage site, indistinguishable at more than a few dozen meters from bodies thrown clear of a crashing gunship.

The trooper who had briefly led the survivors of this unit lay beside Joram. Joram cleared his throat to ask a question, then thought better of it. He'd meant to ask, "What's your name?" But clone troopers didn't have

names, just alphanumeric designations. Come to think of it, how was Joram supposed to keep straight which trooper was which?

"Trooper," Joram said, "it's time for you and the others to have nicknames."

The trooper looked at him suspiciously. "Sir, nicknames aren't procedure--"

"Oh, yes, they are. They're unofficial procedure. Besides, following orders is procedure, and I'm ordering you to come up with a nickname for yourself. Then you and I are going to come up with nicknames for the others, and maybe figure out ways to make you visually distinct... without bending procedures too far."

The trooper opened his mouth. Joram, knowing what he was about to say, shot him a look -- he didn't want to hear "But that's not procedure" again. The trooper shut his mouth again.

After several minutes, during which slow, strong winds rustled along the canyon top and spilled sand down the cliff slopes, the trooper asked, "What is a nickname supposed to be like?"

"Well, usually it points to one of your features that is distinctive, or some event from your past that is more about you than anyone else. What is unique about you?"

"I lost a tooth once." He opened his mouth wide and pointed at an upper molar. It looked no different from the corresponding molar on the other side. "They fixed it, but it was out for awhile. One of my platoon mates struck me harder than he meant to in hand-to-hand combat training, and out it came."

"Well, that's something. Now you can be Tooth. See?"

"I see. Tooth." The trooper probed at the restored molar with his tongue. "if I may ask, sir..."

"Go ahead."

"What's your nickname?"

"Well, I've had several. Most often, Dodge."

"Because that was your greatest proficiency in martial training?"

"No, because my greatest proficiency has always been in getting out of work assignments."

"Oh." Tooth frowned, thinking that over.

Mentally, Joram kicked himself. That sort of admission, which entertained most people, probably wouldn't go over too well with this unit of hard-working soldiers.

A stone fell past his place of concealment and hit the soil below. It was followed by another, then a third, at quick regular intervals.

Tooth pulled his helmet on. Joram moved handfuls of vegetation -- dry, root-like tangles recently harvested from another part of the canyon wall -- to conceal the two of them.

The rocks were a signal from the clone trooper atop the cliff, who should now be concealing himself. Joram had expressly forbidden use of comlinks while they were at this site; their use might be detected.

For another few minutes Joram and Tooth lay silent. The wind above kicked more sand down on the canyon floor, sometimes sending little streams of it past their place of concealment.

Finally Joram heard a faint roar, and a figure mounted on a flying apparatus rode into view from the left-the west. The figure was spindly and distorted in comparison with human proportions, and the device it rode was similarly spare. It consisted of a vertical housing, obviously kept aloft by a combination of repulsorlifts and thrusters, with brackets for the feet, handlebars for the hands, forward-mounted blasters, and not much else, not even a seat or windscreen. This was the Single Trooper Aerial Platform, or STAP, designed for use by Trade Federation battle droids. Joram doubted a human being could even fly the thing.

Its operator was a battle droid, the sort Joram had seen in the holos, with a head like a drooping game fowl bill, a short-barreled blaster weapon held by a sling to its back. It stopped the STAP twenty meters from the gunship's wreckage and dismounted, leaving the thing hovering there. It advanced toward the nearest set of empty clone trooper armor, its billhead turning from side to side.

The battle droid deliberately aimed and fired a single blast into the faceplate of the clone trooper helmet. The blast burned through. A plume of black smoke rose from the helmet. Methodically, the droid aimed at the other figures lying near the wreckage and fired at each; its blasts battered and blackened the empty suits of armor.

Satisfied, the droid advanced on the gunship. A moment later, Joram heard the drone of more oncoming craft. More droid-operated STAPs roared in from the west-ten, by Joram's quick count, two units of five flanking a lumbering, disk-shaped airspeeder at least four meters in diameter.

Joram smiled. Here was transport they could actually use.

The STAPs stopped near the one left by the advance scout and their riders dismounted. The droid operating the airspeeder set it down nearby. It did not leave its vehicle but did stand to obtain better visibility and held its blaster at the ready.

Joram could feel Tooth's gaze on him. Joram had made it absolutely clear that no trooper was to fire before he did, and now was the time.

He checked his blaster rifle to make sure that its safety mechanism was disengaged. Carefully, he moved the vegetation aside so he could move forward a few more centimeters. He aimed at the droid nearest, but not on, the speeder, and pulled the trigger.

His blaster bolt hit the sand next to the droid, missing by a handful of centimeters.

But a fraction of a second later, seven more bolts leaped out from the clone troopers' positions of concealment -- vegetation-shrouded stands of rocks, the top of the cliff, mounds of sand as artfully draped as any child's sand citadel, and precisely placed chunks of gunship wreckage. Seven battle droids

exploded into irredeemable trash in that instant, including the one on the airspeeder, hit expertly from the side by one of the troopers half-buried in sand.

The other five battle droids spun, brought up their weapons, sought out targets-and clone trooper blasts converged on them. The five droids were torn to metallic shreds, parts of them bouncing across the canyon floor.

Joram let out a thoroughly unmilitary whoop.

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The airspeeder, with Tooth at the controls, with Joram, the other troopers, and two STAPs piled into the back, rose into the air and headed eastward. Behind them, the wreckage of the gunship detonated as the warhead the troopers had activated finally counted down to zero. Chunks of metal flew up nearly the height of the cliffs, reached the apex of their flights, and descended as burning fireballs. "What now, sir?" Tooth asked. "Head to Tur Lorkin?"

"Close." Joram leaned back against the airspeeder's rail next to the controls. The speeder had no seats, but he could stretch out his legs and let the wind rush across him. "We need to keep to the canyons to make it harder for flyovers to spot us. Who's your navigator?"

The troopers, all with helmets off, exchanged looks.

"No navigator." Joram sighed. "Who has a working datapad with a planetary map?"

The most seriously injured trooper, whose broken leg had been braced and splinted, raised a hand.

"All right," Joram said. "You, plot us a route that will keep us in the canyons until we get as close as possible to Tur Lorkin. When we get there, we'll bounce out of the canyon, hide this speeder, and wait until dark. By the way, your nickname is now Mapper. Don't forget it." He closed his eyes.

"Excuse me, sir," Tooth said. "Procedure says we need to find the most efficient route to our destination and travel that way."

Joram nodded. "Listen, I'm not going to kid you. I'm not a military expert, and you are. But some of the stuff I've heard from real Intelligence people says the enemy knows a lot about the clone troopers, which to me suggests that they probably know your procedures, too. So what does that mean?"

Tooth was silent for a few moments, during which Joram just enjoyed the breeze blowing across his face. "That they might lie in wait for us on the most efficient route."

"Correct!"

"I see."

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The Pengalan sun was higher now, reaching its zenith, and the troopers' stolen speeder was safely tucked away in a glade surrounded by tall tendril-plants. One of the troopers-the first one Joram had spoken to upon awakening, now nicknamed Digger-had gathered tendrils from several of the plants and stretched them over the top of the speeder, tying them together to conceal the vehicle's presence from the air. Two troopers, Spots and Spade, were out at a distance of thirty meters or so, acting as guards. It was, according to Mapper, less than fifty clicks from Tur Lorkin.

Tooth paused over the rations he was eating. As soon as they'd set up temporary camp here, the troopers had broken out the meals, trays with heating elements at the bottom of each compartment. "If I might ask, sir -- "

"Go ahead."

"You don't seem to have had any military training. Why were you attached to us as an observer?"

"You mean, what qualifies me to pass judgment on you, when I'm so obviously out of my depth?"

The other troopers grinned. Tooth merely said, "Something like that, sir."

"The Republic paid a lot of credits for you-to create this clone army. That money is gone, but there are a lot of people in government who want to know if it was well-spent ... and whether they ought to throw any more credits into the same program, to expand the clone ranks."

"I see. So you are -- "

"An accountant. But I've been all over. I managed to persuade my doting, rich aunt Tagdel to support me in educational programs all over the Republic until she wised up and insisted that I start work, which is when she got me the appointment at the Department of Cost Accounting-she's with the Ministry of Finance. I've been through the Airspeeders for Bodyguards and Security Specialists training course on Coruscant, the Success Through Charismatic Influence regimen on Commenor, Xenoecoengineering Financial Principles on Muun, Subaquatic Manufacturing Economies on Mon Cal -- "

"Why so many places?" asked Digger. "Isn't one good enough?"

Joram thought about that. "I guess not. If a place isn't somehow yours, it's just not going to be good enough. My parents died in an airspeeder accident when I was three, and after that I was bounced around among all my other kin, so no place ever became home." He glanced among the troopers and found little comprehension on their faces. He knew the notion of parents, and what they meant to a child, was something the troopers had no perspective to appreciate. Even the notion of childhood was alien to them. "Guys, imagine that the war is really bad and every one of the troopers but you perishes. The only time you ever get to see that face is in the mirror. Wouldn't that be strange?"

They all nodded. "Yeah," said Digger. His tone was solemn.

"Well, that's kind of what it's like."

"Ever been to Kamino?" asked Mapper.

"No, I haven't,"

"That's where we're from, Kamino. It's somehow ours."

"Yes, I know."

"Very rainy there."

"Yes, I know."

Tooth cleared his throat, silencing Mapper. "We're all curious about what sort of conclusions you came to."

"About-? Oh, about you. As in, were you worth the credits?"

"Yes, sir."

"I would say, very much so. Your calmness and courage under fire, your fighting skills, your physical resilience, and especially the way you coordinate things, each of you just knowing what the next is about to do ... these are all very valuable traits. I'd say my review is very favorable. If you lack anything, it's . . . " A realization that he was about to say something counterproductive hit Joram, and he shut up.

If the troopers lacked anything, it was individuality, and an associated ability to think in nontraditional, nonlinear ways-traits Joram valued very highly. But would individuality make them more valuable, or less? Wouldn't it foul up these troopers' extraordinary unit coordination if they all thought a bit differently from one another?

And wouldn't that, in turn, make them less effective, less valuable to the Republic? It hit Joram that in pushing them to become more distinct, to think outside their beloved military procedures, he might just be sabotaging them. And in this war, that might actually constitute treason.

The troopers all stared at him, waiting for his next words. Mapper's spoon, dripping blue gravy, was poised halfway between his plate and his open mouth.

Joram forced a smile for them. "Come to think of it, you don't lack anything I can think of." The men relaxed, and Mapper's spoon continued its interrupted journey. "And since you men are exactly like all the other thousands of clone troopers, the Republic obviously has one magnificent army."

He'd thought the comment would be taken as a compliment, but the troopers froze and exchanged looks, communicating something that no one not sharing their DNA and training could interpret.

"What is it?" Joram asked.

Tooth returned his attention to Joram. "Nothing, sir."

"You're certain?"

The trooper was expressionless. "Yes, Sir."

Joram sighed inwardly. He didn't like secrets. Other peoples' secrets, anyway. He couldn't imagine that these men, conditioned to obedience, would withhold something from him under these circumstances -- unless they were obeying previous orders. So he let it drop.

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The macrobinoculars gave Joram a clear view of Tur Lorkin from the hilltop he and the troopers were now using as their base of operation.

The community was a small town, unwalled, most of its buildings being constructed from prefabricated or mold-blown permacrete painted in white or light blue. The buildings all looked to be of recent years, construction, well maintained. The largest buildings were a dome that appeared to house city government and a set of truncated domes with sliding doors on top-the town's tiny spaceport. Joram placed the town population at a few hundred. Numbers automatically began to run through the back of his mind-annual cost of the town's power requirements, estimated cost of consumable imports, value of the buildings that made up the community. He swept the macrobinoculars around, but again he saw no more distant lights, no sign of nearby communities or even outlying farms or ranches.

He passed the viewing device back to Tooth. "What do you think?"

The trooper stared down at the town. "I think it will be simple to get down in among the buildings. There's not much foot traffic. I wonder why?"

"Pretty typical for a small f -- , uh, a small town." Joram had almost said "small farm community" before remembering that wasn't what this place was. "People in such places tend to start work before dawn and then go to bed early."

"Oh."

Back at the airspeeder, concealed under vegetation at the bottom of the other side of the hill, Joram described the situation for the other troopers. "Who has the best infiltration skills?" he asked.

Mapper, of the splinted leg, raised his hand.

"Right. Well, I guess it will be Tooth and me. Wrench, how are the modifications coming?"

The trooper with the highest level of mechanical expertise looked up from the partially disassembled STAP he was working on. "I'm rigging a cable net to act a a sling so the pilot won't fall off. The modifications to the controls, so a human can pilot it, are done."

"Great."

"But are we going to need it, if we're just going to steal a transport and run?"

Joram shrugged. "I don't know. But both sides of my personality, the coward and the accountant, say that it's a good idea to maximize your resources whenever possible."

"Yes, sir. Maximize. Question, sir. What do we do if someone, one of the townsfolk, stumbles across this camp while you're gone?"

"You catch him, kill him, cook him, and eat him."

Wrench frowned. All the other troopers frowned. It was the same frown.

"Pardon me, sir," Tooth said. "Cannibalism is very definitely against procedures."

Joram snorted. "That was a joke."

Tooth shook his head. "That wasn't a joke. Nobody fell down."

Mapper shook his head, "Nobody said, 'What's the difference between ...'"

Digger shook his head. "Nobody said, Three Separatists walk into a bar."

"Guys, guys, there are more types of jokes than the ones you're familiar with."

Tooth looked dubious. "If you say so, Sir."

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Joram and Tooth lay at the very edge of the tendril vegetation, a mere twenty meters from the nearest of Tur Lorkin's buildings. Tooth wore only his undersuit, a dark one-piece garment that would pass as a jumpsuit at a distance.

"Sir, I have a question."

Joram, macrobinoculars to his eyes, slowly swept his attention from light-post to light-post. He didn't see any sign that there were holocams or other surveillance devices on the posts. "Go ahead."

"Are you really a coward?"

"I think so, yes. Lazy, too. I try to avoid work, pain, and danger whenever possible. I'm willing to risk some loss of face by walking away from a fight instead of getting my guts stomped out to impress people. I prefer to be operated on while under anesthesia."

"But, logically, you're risking death with this mission. Whereas you could have avoided all danger by ordering us to surrender back at the crash site. Then you'd spend the rest of the war in prison, away from the fighting."

"Even cowards have goals, Tooth. How big or small a coward you are sort of depends on what you're willing to risk to accomplish your goals. One of my goals is to be free. To go where I want to go, to do what I want to do."

A twinge of discomfort tugged at Joram. He was talking about personal freedom with someone who probably had no notion of the concept.

"What about duty, sir? Do you recognize duty?"

"I suppose I do. I could have tried to wriggle out of this assignment, and I didn't." He shrugged. "Part of freedom -- a civilian's freedom, anyway -- means being able to evaluate and choose the duties you acknowledge rather than just believing what someone tells you your duty is."

"You're talking about judgment."

"That's right."

"What happens when judgment and orders clash?"

"I don't know. I guess you have to decide what's right, and take that as your goal, even if you know it's going to cause you trouble."

"Did you ever think that maybe you were chosen for this assignment because you were lazy?"

Joram frowned. He set aside the macrobinoculars to look at Tooth.
"Meaning that, since someone was aware of my reputation, whoever chose me for the mission was counting on my laziness."

"Yes, sir."

"My conclusion was that the clone troopers were worth the credits spent. Even if I am lazy, I think that's the correct conclusion. I don't think someone who works harder than I do would arrive at a different answer."

"I hope not, sir."

Tooth's idea bothered Joram, but he was pleased that Tooth had asked the question. It showed the man did have intellectual processes.

"I don't think there are any security cams. Let's move out."

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Tooth took the lead, moving as surely and silently as a jungle predator. They reached the outmost town buildings without incident, and, by ducking down dirt alleys, staying in shadowy patches, and keeping alert for the rare pedestrian, they remained unseen across the hundred meters or so between them and the spacecraft bays.

They stood in an alley mouth directly opposite the entry door into the smallest of the bays. The area was poorly lit. Joram could barely see the oval of the door itself, beside it, a security keypad glowed. "Can you decode or bypass that?"

"I think so, sir. I'll have to look at it, but it appears to be a simple design."

"Why three bays?"

"What?" Tooth looked at him, puzzled.

"Why does a one-nerf town like this have three spacecraft bays? That means at least three spacecraft are here routinely. The town probably just needs one big bay for cargo vessels, for export of whatever it produces ... " The numbers running through the back of his mind moved to the front, and he fell silent again.

"I don't understand, sir."

"This town has no evident industry. Its biggest buildings are the government center and the largest ship bay. There are no farms. No ranches. What purpose does the town serve?"

Tooth shrugged. "It's where the factory workers lived before the factory was shut down?"

"No. That factory was shut down a long time ago. Reactivated just to serve as bait for our assault. Its workers probably lived at the factory. All these

buildings were built since it was deactivated. So, what is this town for? What's its economy?"

"It's been here too long just to have been built as a trap." Tooth looked around, eyes narrowed. "If it has too many spacecraft facilities, the purpose probably has an offworld significance."

"Very good."

"The answer's going to be with the spacecraft. The biggest spacecraft. Let's go there instead."

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The largest spacecraft bay was also the best-lit. With his new suspicions about this site, Joram wasn't anxious to have Tooth, who admitted to being technically competent but not a security expert, spend minutes in the light making an attempt at the security keypad at the bay's main access.

So they waited a long, tedious hour in nearby shadows and watched that access. Finally, two men in stained jumpsuits arrived on foot. One keyed in a lengthy access code.

As the doors slid open, Tooth and Joram leaped for them. Tooth, faster, hit the farther man in the jaw with the butt of his blaster rifle before the nearer man was even aware of his presence. The nearer man jumped away from Tooth, backing toward Joram, and Joram drove the butt of his own rifle into the back of the man's head, the second worker hit the ground only a moment after the first.

Tooth and Joram dragged their respective victims inside, into darkness. They waited until the outer doors had slid shut again before switching on their personal glowrods.

This was a basic spacecraft bay. The antechamber they'd entered was empty except for a few old foam seats and a caf dispenser, which was powered down. One secure door led into what had to be the bay's control chamber; a larger one led into what had to be the main hangar. There was a window into the hangar as well, but a blast plate behind it was in place, preventing anyone from looking in.

Joram looked over the door security while Tooth searched the prisoners. "Identicard slot and fingerprint scanner," Joram said. "On both doors."

"We have their identicards, and we have their fingers. We also have small blaster pistols, modern comlinks, a flask with some sort of alcohol."

Joram indicated the door into the control chamber. He noticed that his hand was still shaking from the violent encounter outside. He quickly made a fist of it and tried to will it to remain still.

Tooth obligingly dragged one unconscious man over to it by the wrist. Joram, hand now more under control, inserted the identicard into the security slot while Tooth held the man's hand in place over the reader. The reader glowed and the door slid open.

Both Joram and Tooth aimed their trooper rifles into the space beyond -- but it was dark, unoccupied. They dragged their prisoners within.

It was a standard control chamber -- three seats allowing access to sensor and comm boards. A large window would provide a view into the bay, but it, too, was sealed behind a blast plate. Rather than open it, Joram switched on a holocam viewer labeled MAIN.

It snapped into instant focus, showing a nearly empty bay. The angle showed the closed observation window, and the floor was well below that, indicating that much of the bay was underground. The wide-open area was brightly lit, and vacuformed cargo containers were piled at the far end. As Joram watched, a man and a woman maneuvered a repulsorlift dolly into place and wrestled another pair of containers off it atop one stack. Then they retreated behind the stacks with their dolly.

Tooth finished binding and gagging the two prisoners. He moved to an unoccupied console seat.

"We've got holocams on the other two bays," Joram said, "which means that this is probably the main spacecraft control." He snapped the other holocam monitors on, then, as they snapped into focus, whistled at what he saw.

One bay was occupied by a hammer-shaped Corellian transport, smaller than, but of the same general design as the well-known Republic cruiser. Its hull was a neutral gray, puckered in places by mynock scars. The other bay was occupied by a sleek, silver-reflective space yacht whose lines suggested speed. "We are in luck. Some proud owner is going to miss one of these ships."

"Both," Tooth said. He was now frowning over a comm board, reviewing screens of data. One of the prisoners' datacards occupied a security slot on the board. "We destroy the one we don't take. Procedure. Correct?"

"Correct ... I suppose." Joram winced at the thought of the yacht being destroyed. "We could steal both. I can pilot one. Can any of you serve as pilots?"

"Wrench and I have gone through a set of simulator classes."

"Well, that may be enough."

"Sir, those containers on the monitor. They contain anti-starfighter missiles."

Joram moved to look over Tooth's shoulder. The screen of data there referred to a cargo of 128 test missiles -- type AS-X-DB. AntiStarfighter, Experimental, he guessed. Diamond Boron.

He whistled again. "The spy's report wasn't a mistake, or a leak. There really is a facility here for making those things."

"Yes, sir."

"But there's no place on this rock that could produce them--no place visible from orbit, anyway. Intelligence's orbital scans would have detected it. All they detected was the site we assaulted this morning. Which means the facility is probably here, underground. The town exists to house its workers and to provide a cover for heat signatures and the like. So ...

"So," Tooth said, "they caught the spy in the act of transmitting. They realized they'd been found out. They fired up that old plant to draw in the forces they knew would be coming and prepared it as a trap. They let us discover that it wasn't a missile plant so, once they'd kicked us in the teeth,

we'd have no reason to come back here. They made us think the whole thing was just a trap, when it was really a cover-up."

Joram nodded. "All right. Here's the plan. We seize one of those transports, pick up the others, outrace whatever pursuit they send, and report to the Republic that they need to come back here and finish this place off."

"I don't think so, sir."

"What?" The edge in Tooth's voice had sounded suspiciously like defiance. Joram took a step to the side to give the man another look.

Tooth spun his chair around to face Joram. "Sir, if we leave and report, the Republic will have to evaluate our story. They'll question us, determine that we're telling the truth, plan a return, come back, and blow up this site. But in the meantime, the Separatists will know that their secret is out -- someone knocked out their workers and stole their transports, less than a day after the Republic assault. So while the planning and interrogating are going on, they're dismantling their plant, moving their stockpiles. Whatever gets blown up will be just what they left behind. The least important part of this facility."

"True." Joram offered Tooth an expression of sympathy. "So what are you saying?"

"Were not going."

Joram blinked. "Tooth, I'm getting kind of tired of saying 'What?' all the time."

"Yes, sir. I'll explain, I'm bringing in the men. We're going to blow this place up. Otherwise we've failed in our mission, which was to destroy the missile plant. Otherwise every one of us who died today died for no good reason."

Joram tapped his chest, where his locket lay under his tunic. "Have you forgotten something? Like, who's in charge here?"

"I haven't forgotten. If you don't agree with me, I'm going to have to... to defy your orders." Tooth looked as though the words he was saying had made him ill, but did not relent. "I can't give you orders. You can steal whichever of

those ships you like and take off. But I'd like you to wait until I bring the men in." He tapped the monitor where it showed the stacks of missile containers. "Somewhere behind those, there has to be an access to the plant. We'll go in there, taking some of those missiles, and blow everything up. Once we're inside, you can take off. Please don't order me not to do this. I'd hate for my last action as a clone trooper to be in direct violation of orders."

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Half an hour later, the rest of the troopers except for the injured Mapper were in the antechamber.

Joram, out of the loop on the mission planning, stayed in the control chamber, methodically performing a remote warm-up on the yacht. He could hear Tooth struggling back into his armor and briefing the troopers. A few snatches of the briefing were audible to Joram.

The briefing turned into discussion, and then discussion turned into argument-something he hadn't heard among the clone troopers in the days he'd been assigned to them. Surreptitiously, he moved to the door into the antechamber and listened.

"It's his right," one of them said. His voice was in dominant mode. It was probably Tooth. "I can't issue him orders."

"You can't issue me orders," said another. His voice, too, was in dominant mode. "And I say we ask him."

"Don't -- "

Armored feet thudded toward the antechamber. Joram stepped out into view and confronted the trooper. The man's helmet was off and there was a rag tied around his forehead, red with white dots, so this was Spots. He reared back at seeing Joram so close, then recovered. "Lieutenant, I have to say something to you."

"Go ahead."

"I think you should come on this raid."

"Why?"

"To show you approve of it. We don't think you do. We're not sure what that means. And for another reason, a tactical one. You're the only one of us who doesn't look like us. We'd work better if we had someone moving in front of the main body as a scout. If the Separatists know as much about us as you say they do, they'd recognize any of us instantly."

"You'd give us a much better chance of success," said another. The burns on his cheek, from the crash, marked him as Hash.

"Let it go," Tooth said.

"Why aren't you with us, Lieutenant?" asked Digger,

Joram stared at the man. How did he know it was Digger? He just did.

He looked between the troopers. First, all he could see was their uncertain, even mournful expressions. Then he could see beyond their current unease. These men weren't the same as they had been in the hour after the crash. Now, they were distinct, individual ... but not united. How could they hope to pull off a raid against an unknown facility, against unknown opposition, if they weren't a cohesive unit?

To restore them to some sense of unity, all he had to do was join them. But just as soon as the raid began, Confederacy aerial support was likely to converge on Tur Lorkin. If he didn't take off before then, he'd be trapped here. Captured or killed.

"I'm with you," Joram said. He tried to keep sudden fear out of his voice. "But I'm not in charge. I seem to be back to being a civilian. This is Tooth's mission to lead." He turned away, hoping they hadn't seen his own expression change ... for he was sure he now looked as uncertain and mournful as they had a moment ago.

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The door at the back of the main hangar -- not an obvious door, just an anonymous section of wall -- slid aside, revealing two men and their repulsorlift dolly, once more loaded with missile containers. Beyond them, a

dimly lit corridor, made of slabs of duracrete, stretched onward and downward.

Joram didn't wait. Now wearing the jumpsuit of one of the captured men, with a billed cap pulled low over his features and headset,

Joram pushed his way past the cargo wranglers, ignoring them,

"Hey!" The men turned after him. "Are you coming on duty?"

Then there were thuds, painful-sounding impacts of rifle butts on flesh. Joram heard the men fall. He looked back and waited.

The troopers didn't take long. On top of the stack of missile containers already on the dolly, they added the container they'd already opened. Wires ran from one of the missiles into Wrench's helmet, which he held in his hands and peered into. The hasty bypass Wrench had accomplished seemed to have done the job; he had already reported that these prototype missiles had very simple control interfaces, a choice of targeting criteria, multiple detonation options ... and no security, not too strange for weapons that were intended to be test-fired rather than used in the field.

Tooth's voice sounded in Joram's headset. "Let's move out."

Joram nodded and continued down the corridor. He shoved his hands into his pockets, slightly reassured by the grips of the blaster pistols taken from the first two men they'd captured. He couldn't hear them, but he knew that Hash and Spade would be moving along several meters behind him, and then the rest, with Spots shoving the dolly as Wrench rode atop it, at the rear.

The corridor-tunnel sloped down gently. Joram put one hand against its wall. It was rough to the touch, and it vibrated. a sign that somewhere, not too close, heavy machinery was in use.

"Ahead, he saw a familiar-looking device attached, to the corridor ceiling, 'Holocam,' he whispered. The surveillance device aimed his direction and would be showing him now; soon enough, the first of the clone troopers would be in its range of vision.

"Get past it and disable it," came the whispered reply. "Everyone else, hold here. Joram, report when it's done."

Now he was Joram instead of Lieutenant. He didn't know whether to be pleased or miffed. He decided to be pleased. The troopers had developed enough initiative to rebel against an authority figure when their goals -- still military goals, goals in the interest of the Republic -- demanded. Now they were men, rather than pre-programmed drones ... slaves.

A happy ending. Unless it got them killed. Got him killed.

He halted directly beneath the holocam, out of its range of vision. Disable it? How? He was not technically proficient like Wrench.

He pulled out one of his blaster pistols and smashed the holocam with three blows of its butt. "Disabled," he said. "Continuing onward."

In some security room somewhere, a holocam monitor would have gone dark. That was bad, something that would cause an alert security team to raise some sort of alarm, but it was still more innocuous than a half-squad of clone troopers materializing within the holocam's view.

A few steps more, and he could see that the corridor ahead became level and better lit. As Joram descended, he saw where the corridor ended. There were blast doors at the end, and something standing beside them --

He felt his insides freeze. It was a droid, taller than a man, glossy brown, with curved, massive limbs and components. Its two pairs of arm-blasters were aimed forward, toward Joram.

He'd seen holes of these things, one of the most dangerous varieties of battle droids manufactured. None of the troopers' blasters would be of any use against the thing. He managed to whisper, "Destroyer."

"How many?"

"One. N-n-n-no living security." The destroyer was not moving, not adjusting its aim as Joram approached ... not yet.

"Slow your approach," the trooper said. Joram had a sudden presentment that it wasn't Tooth talking to him, but one of the others. "As slow as you can, but don't look suspicious. Tell us when you're thirty meters from it. Wrench, prep one, infrared targeting, heat signature of a combat droid instead of a human."

Gulping against sudden fear-nausea, Joram slowed his walk. He pulled his stolen identicard from a pocket, fiddled with it, turning it over and over, as if trying to remember which edge to present to the security slot he assumed would be in the door.

Still the destroyer didn't react.

"Ready," said one trooper. He wasn't sure who it was.

"Destroyer sighted," said another -- or perhaps the same one.

The destroyer became active, crouching, probably to give its sensory platform a better angle on what was happening farther down the corridor, behind Joram.

"Joram. fall down." a trooper said.

Joram fell, as fast as he could compel his knees to give way, and it almost wasn't fast enough. There was a roar behind him, directly over him as he hit the duracrete floor. He saw the air around the destroyer shimmer as it activated its own defensive shields --

Then there was a brilliant flash, a howl of noise as though a moon-sized beast had just been gut-shot. Joram felt heat wash over him. A wall his dazzled eyes couldn't see hammered him, sent him skidding backward.

He lay there unmoving, his brain somehow not translating the orders of "Get up! Get away!" to his limbs, and then someone was swatting his back and legs.

"Hold on there, sir." The voice was a trooper's, dim and distant. "You're kind of on fire. It's almost out."

"Very kind of you," Joram managed. He pushed himself upright and look down the corridor. As his dazzled sight recovered, he could see the corridor's end-walls, ceiling, and floor scorched and blown away in chunks, filled with fiery remains of what had been a destroyer, the blast doors knocked off their rails.

There was a ringing in his ears that diminished when he pressed his headset tighter over his ears.

He was surrounded by clone troopers now, Hash and Spade ahead with blasters at the ready, Digger helping Joram to his feet, Wrench back on the dolly preparing another missile, Spots ready to shove the dolly forward. Wrench's armor was blackened all across the front surfaces, but the darkening seemed to be from smoke and soot rather than burn.

"That's an alarm," Digger said. "I think the stealth phase of our mission is at an end."

"Where's Tooth?"

Digger shook his head. "You don't want to know."

"What?"

"Move out. On the double." Digger gestured, and Hash and Spade headed forward at a trot. Joram stumbled along behind. Points on his arms and legs felt raw. He decided not to look at the burns.

Past the twisted wreckage of the blast doors was more corridor, but this had sliding doors at intervals. It was long enough to be indistinct at the far end. Joram could see figures rushing toward them from the far end. Closer, doors slid open. People stepped out, saw the clone troopers, and jumped back out of sight again. "Where to?" Digger asked.

"Final assembly area," Joram said. "Plants have different areas where the different components are made or stored, and then an area where the subassemblies are all put together. That's the most crucial part of the facility."

Digger stepped up. "But where's that going to be?"

"Somewhere that dolly can get to."

Someone in the distance opened fire with what sounded like a blaster pistol. Joram maneuvered to stand directly behind Hash and crouched there. He continued, "That means down this corridor or through that doorway there - " He pointed to a doublewide access about twenty meters down the corridor. "Those are the only two places the dolly can fit through."

"Forward," Digger said.

Hash and Spade, returning fire against the distant defenders, moved up to the wide doorway, Joram close behind Hash. Digger marched resolutely in front of the missile dolly, protecting its explosive cargo from incoming fire. Joram saw the trooper's chest armor blacken where it took a glancing hit, saw Digger stagger from the impact.

The door had turbolift controls to the side. Joram slapped the summon button. The doors didn't open immediately. "We may have to run a bypass -- "

The doors opened. The cylindrical turbolift beyond had just one occupant, a man of slight build and graying hair-and, as soon as he glimpsed the clone troopers, a frightened expression.

Joram grabbed him by the collar of his blue jumpsuit and drove him to the back of the turbolift, slamming him into the wall there. He jammed a blaster pistol into the man's gut. "Do you want to take us to the final assembly area, or do you want to die here?"

The man choked a moment, then said, "Two levels down. Card access only -- "

"Does your identicard give you access?"

The man nodded and held the card up. A trooper extended an arm over Joram's shoulder and took the card. A moment later, the troopers were all in the turbolift, and it began its descent.

"Not bad, Joram," Digger said, obviously stifling a laugh. "Where'd you learn that, trooper training?"

"Oh, shut up."

A moment later, the turbolift doors opened. Blaster fire poured into the lift like sideways rain, tearing into Hash. Joram shoved himself and his prisoner aside as Digger, Spade, and Spots returned fire. Hash crashed to the lift floor and steam rose from the holes in his torso armor.

The clone troopers continued to fire. The incoming blasts trailed off and ceased. Digger spared a look at Hash, who was unmoving. "Spade, give him a look. Everyone else, move out."

They emerged into a large fabrication area -- Joram saw conveyor belts, mechanical hoists on ceiling tracks, huddled groups of jumpsuited workers, the remains of security agents and combat droids.

Wrench pointed toward a set of gleaming blue shelves on which were mechanical assemblies that looked like truncated cones. "Those are the same warheads as in the missiles."

Joram said, "The door beside it will be the access to the warhead storage or assembly area."

Digger nodded. "That's where we drop our second missile." He turned to the prisoner. "Are there stairwells or ramps out of here? Anything other than this turbolift?"

The man nodded.

"Use them to get out of here. Take these people. Everything's about to blow up." Digger gave the man a shove. "You have sixty seconds."

The man ran,

"Hash's dead, Digger."

"Thanks, Spade. Wrench -- "

"I know what to do."

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They brought the turbolift up to the level by which they'd entered, but didn't let the doors open.

Ten seconds later, the explosions began. The floor hammered at Joram's heels and a shudder ran through the lift.

Joram hit the open button. Smoke and heat poured in. Joram, lacking a trooper's helmet, found himself blind and choking.

Someone grabbed his wrist and hauled. He was coughing, tripping over people, sometimes stumbling, sometimes being dragged. He heard blaster fire, the ringing noise it made when it hit metal doors, the thudding impacts it made against trooper armor, the hissing wail it made when it superheated organic tissues to the boiling point.

Then he was running and being dragged up a slope -- they had to be on the inclined corridor out of the complex. More explosions sounded behind them. As his vision cleared, he could see more people around him, jumpsuited workers who stayed clear of the clone troopers.

Back in the big hangar bay, factory workers streamed around them, hands half-raised as if to say "Don't shoot," their expressions fearful. Joram was able to suppress his coughing and take stock. Digger, Wrench, and Spots were still with him. "Hash and Spade?" he asked, his voice rough.

Digger shook his head. He handed Joram one of the fallen troopers' blaster rifles. "Ready to finish it?"

Joram checked the rifle's charge and held it at the ready. 'I guess so.'

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Digger led the charge to the exit from the bay building. "Stand back!" he shouted. "Troopers coming through!"

Workers leaped away from them. There was fear on some of their faces, loathing on others. Oddly, Joram felt proud of that.

The exterior door, Joram saw, was open. He and the troopers positioned themselves beside it. "They're going to be waiting," Joram said. The floor trembled as another set of distant explosions began, and a thick black layer of smoke poured out of the bay along the ceiling of the antechamber.

"You bet they are," Digger said. "Emerging in three, two, one, zero -- " Digger turned into the open doorway. Joram expected him to be riddled with blaster fire as Hash had been, and there was the sudden roar of blaster weaponry-but no laser blasts flashed in through the door.

Joram followed the clone troopers out at a dead run. The buildings around the bay were pocked with smoking blaster impact and a unit of battle droids, to the left, was mostly in pieces. Those who remained functional were turning and firing in the wake of a clone trooper roaring away on a STAID. The trooper's rear end rested against an improvised webbing of cable, which kept him from falling off, and his leg was splinted, immobile.

Digger, Wrench, Spots, and Joram poured fire into the battle droids, finishing those that Mapper had not already destroyed. "This way," Digger said, and charged off around the curved wall of the hangar.

Incoming fire, from men or droids shooting from concealed position, grazed Spots and knocked Wrench down. Joram and Spots got Wrench on his feet and they continued forward at a stumbling pace while Digger returned fire. Ahead, the doorway into a smaller bay came into view-and then exploded as someone approaching from the opposite direction fired on it with heavier ordnance.

Digger kept them moving forward. Seconds later, Mapper, on his STAID, flew through the ruined doorway. Joram and the other troopers were moments behind him.

The interior doorway from antechamber into hangar bay was already open, and beyond were the sleek, silvery lines of the yacht Joram had already prepped. "You know how to fly this, right?" Digger asked.

"It's a little late to be asking." Joram helped Mapper unhook the STAP's cable sling and slid into position under the trooper's arm. He helped the trooper to the yacht's open access hatch. 'And, yes, I do."

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Joram's hands didn't stop shaking until they cleared orbit. Starfield filled the yacht's forward viewports, a scene that Joram usually found lovely, beckoning. Now he was too tired to appreciate it. He began calculating and keying in their first hyperspace jump.

There had been no pursuit. "Why weren't we followed?" he asked Digger, who sat in the co-pilot's seat.

Digger, his helmet off, rubbed at tired-looking eyes. "The pursuit was drawn off."

"By what?"

"By Tooth. His job was to take the other transport out and lead the starfighter support away from Tur Lorkin."

"Will he -- will he be joining us?"

Digger gave him a sympathetic look, but shook his head. "He was transmitting during his part of the mission. I heard him go down."

Joram sighed. He turned his attention back to the navigation computer. "He knew, didn't he? That his part of it would be a suicide mission."

"He knew."

"I'm sorry." A question occurred to Joram. He wrestled with it for a moment before daring to ask it. "What's it like for you? To lose someone you've known all your life, someone who, in so many ways, is you?"

"It's like being shot. Feeling the burn, not being able to breathe easily." Digger fixed him with his gaze. "What's it like for you? Losing someone you've worked with so closely, someone you've come to rely on?"

"I've never been shot. But I think it's the same."

They were silent for long moments, while Joram finished his astronavigational task. The yacht's hyperdrive warmed up for its first jump. Then Digger said, "There's something you ought to know.'

"What's that?"

"We're not regulars. My platoon. We were made to be, how'd they put it, a little more self-reliant than the others. To be capable of more initiative. There are some more out there like us. In case they need troopers for more specialized missions."

Joram thought about that. "So I was supposed to evaluate you, and assume you were the norm, and offer up a glowing report of the clone troopers' military value. To help persuade the powers that be that all troopers perform like elites."

"I guess so."

"I might as well do just that. It's never a good idea to foul up a cover-up until you know what it's there for. But why did you tell me?"

"Because you deserved to know. Because you're one of us."

The words hung there, as though they'd been fixed in the air by a holoprojector instead of spoken, until Joram activated the hyperdrive.

Recovered from the Great Holocron, the following recording by Jedi Master Mace Windu provides information about a specific variation on Form VII, and its dangerous connection to the dark side. Made in 22 B.B.Y., the recording also reveals previously unknown details about certain events during the Clone Wars.

*Master Ki-Adi-Mundi and Master Kolar.
This data tape has been sent directly to you
as a precaution against Separatist spies
who have been attempting to intercept
Republic transmissions.*

*All members of the Council are aware
that we've lost a great many Jedi in the
three months since the Republic declared
war against the Separatists. Not only those
who died in combat, but also those who
have refused to serve as generals, instead
choosing to abandon the Order. Most
recently, Sora Bulq, who fought by our side
on Geonosis, chose to leave for his family's
estate on Ruul, a moon of the Weequay
homeworld Sriluur.*

*As a lightsaber instructor at the Temple,
Sora trained and influenced many, many Jedi.
When Quinlan Vos had to be retrained after
the events that left his memory impaired,
it was Sora who helped Quinlan regain his
focus with a lightsaber. But on our recent
mission to Lianna, Masters Tholme, Yoda,
and I learned that Sora had taught Quinlan
a maneuver from a Form VII variation known
as Vaapad. Obviously, I recognized Vaapad
because I developed it. Quinlan claimed that
Sora said nothing about Vaapad, and told
me that he will not use the maneuver again.*

*I sensed Quinlan spoke without deceit,
but his awareness of Vaapad is disturbing,
particularly since Sora Bulq helped me*

develop the maneuver. Except for Depa Billaba, I have never encouraged any other Jedi to adopt Vaapad.

Ki-Adi-Mundi, you are aware that for me, Vaapad is . . . personal. To Agen Kolar, I shall explain.

I developed Vaapad to answer my own weakness, and channel my inner darkness into a weapon of the light. To use Vaapad, a Jedi must give himself over to the thrill of battle, enjoying the fight and the satisfaction of winning. A Jedi must also accept and embrace the fury of his opponent. This transforms a Jedi into half of a superconducting loop, the other half being the power of darkness, which passes in and out of the Jedi without touching him.

Vaapad is more than a fighting style. It is a state of mind, a path that leads through the penumbra of the dark side.

It is also not meant for any Jedi without my approval.

Shortly after this, Quinlan discovered that four leaders of dissident Jedi—Master K’Kruhk, Master Sian Jeisel, the Jedi Knight Rhad Tarn, and Sora’s former Padawan Mira—had gathered on Ruul. All these Jedi had different reasons for renouncing their commissions. Sora Bulq invited me to Ruul to meet with the other Jedi and discuss the possibility of preventing a schism within the Order.

Soon after I arrived on Ruul, I confronted Sora about whether he had indeed taught a move from Vaapad to Quinlan Vos. Sora answered that he had been testing Quinlan, and that he pursued it no further after Quinlan passed the test.

But the meeting on Ruul turned out to be a trap. We were attacked by a female assassin, possibly a Rattataki, who wielded two red-bladed lightsabers with curved hilts. Her weapons were not unlike the one used

by Count Dooku on Geonosis, or the pair used by his failed Padawan, Komari Vosa.

I regret I was slow to ascertain that this assassin had been contracted by Sora Bulq, who identified her as Asajj Ventress. Even worse, I failed to foresee that Sora had gone to the dark side.

Sora claimed that he was long fascinated by the dark side, and by our work on Vaapad. He had intended to kill the other Jedi on Ruul and blame me for their deaths in order to widen the schism that divides our Order. He also claimed to be a true master of Vaapad. It is my contention that Vaapad has mastered Sora Bulq.

Ventress killed Mira and quickly conscripted Rhad Tarn before she escaped. Tarn was slain by Jeisel, who left Ruul with K’Kruhk and myself because we were too badly outnumbered by the droids that Sora Bulq unleashed upon us.

It is imperative to alert all Jedi that Sora Bulq has gone to the dark side. We must also learn more about this Asajj Ventress. The Archives yielded no information about her, and it may be pure speculation that her lightsabers indicate any alliance with Count Dooku. There is an undeniable darkness about her, but I sensed she was not a Sith.

Given that Sora Bulq is no longer trustworthy, we must allow for the possibility that Quinlan Vos knows more of Vaapad than he admits. Quinlan is currently on a mission to Brentaal IV. Let us be mindful of him. I now know that it was a mistake to expose Sora Bulq to Vaapad, and hope the mistake will not extend to Quinlan.

I look forward to your return to Coruscant. May the Force be with you.

The League of Spies

"I'm here to make your day a lucky one" Joram said.

The head he addressed had sharp, intelligent features surrounded by a neatly trimmed black beard and mustache. The man who owned it had the door to his quarters open only a few centimeters so Joram couldn't see the rest of his body.

The man said nothing. He glanced over Joram's shoulder to the land-speeder lane beyond, a city thoroughfare that was crowded with fast-moving speeders and slower delivery flats.

Joram repeated, "I'm here to make your day..."

The door slid fully open, revealing the man to be of Joram's above-average height. He was as broad in the shoulder as Joram but more muscular. He wore close-fitting black garments that were completely out of style on this color-mad, comfort-conscious world. He seized the collar of Joram's tunic and yanked.

Joram couldn't help but lean forward, but caught himself on the doorjamb with one hand. "...a lucky one," he concluded.

"Get in here."

"Countersign."

"I'm your mission commander, and I say get in here instantly"

Joram grinned. "My blaster in your gut says I stay here until I hear the correct countersign."

The man looked down. A holdout blaster, small enough to be dwarfed by Joram's right hand, was indeed pressed into his stomach. "I am very proficient in the combat arts and I knew that was there," the man said. "I could have taken it from you at any time."

"Countersign." Joram held his smile. A red dot danced around on the chest and neck of the man he faced, but the fellow couldn't see it. If he tried to seize the blaster, he would die.

The man sighed. "You don't need luck when you're as well-placed as I am"

"Correct." Joram returned the blaster to the holster against the base of his spine.

"Now get in here."

"And my partner?"

"Partner?"

The one in the alley across the landspeeder lane. The one with the laser rifle pointed at you; eye."

The man glared over Joram's shoulder. "Oh, him. I was wondering if you meant a second partner. Sure, have him over."

Joram crooked two fingers over his shoulder and beckoned.

Moments later, Mapper dodged traffic to cross the landspeeder lane and join them. He was a well-built man with dark hair, beard, and mustache that made his features seem brooding; he wore the lightweight, flowing garments common to this world of Tarhassan and carried an elongated case with the words "Pebdy Plumbing Supplies" stenciled on the side. The owner of the dwelling turned to lead Joram and Mapper inside.

The main living chamber was decorated in an even more mismatched and garish fashion than the spaceport had been. The room's gold-brown tikkiwood paneling clashed with the overstuffed red-and-white-striped furniture that reminded Joram. of overweight tourists at a beach resort. Two people were already there, a man and a woman arrayed upon and, in the woman's case, almost swallowed by the billowy furniture.

"All right, we're all here," their host said. "Let's get back to it. Our objective-"

"Maybe introductions first?" Joram said.

The man stood still for several moments, saying nothing, but his lips moved. It took Joram a moment to realize that he was counting to ten.

"All right, all right," the man said. "I'm Cherek Tuhm." He cocked his head, looking at Joram as though waiting for a response.

Joram offered his hand.

"Joram Kithe. And this is my partner, Mapper Gann."

Mapper gave the others a curt nod; he didn't speak. He seldom did, except to Joram. Mapper wasn't comfortable in most social situations. Only Joram and his superiors knew that Mapper was a clone trooper, one of the thousands of warriors bred to fight the Republic's wars. Mapper had belonged to a unit of enhanced clones, men with more personal initiative than most of their cohorts. Injured in the mission where he'd met Joram, he'd been unable to rejoin his unit for several weeks, so his supervisors had assigned him to Joram as bodyguard and partner-in-part so that Joram could continue evaluating the virtues of clone troopers. Now operating with a new name, Mapper was unused to living outside the regimented and homogenized society of his peers. At least he did a fair job of concealing his unease.

Cherek ignored Joram's hand. He gestured to the woman.

"Timan Hanther."

She was of less-than-average height and slender, middle-aged, with aristocratic features and intelligent hazel eyes. She wore expensive jade-green garments in the local style, plus a turban to match. She offered Joram and Mapper a brief smile and a nod.

Obviously wearying of the social niceties that were keeping him from his briefing, Cherek gestured dismissively at the last person present.

"And Livintius Sazet. Can I stop wasting time now? I'm only the mission commander."

Livintius was humanoid but not human. Also middle-aged, the Falleen wore his graying black hair long in a ponytail. His skin had a greenish tinge to it, and his eyes, though human in configuration, had a reptilian aloofness to them. His features were broad, his forehead high. He wore local garments in blues that contrasted well with his skin tone. He gave Joram and Mapper a little smile.

"You are correct, Cherek. You are only the mission commander. Now we'll vote to see whether or not you may proceed."

"That's not funny." Cherek flopped into one of the overstuffed chairs. As he sank into it, it settled with a noise like an asthmatic bantha letting out a long breath. "You two, sit."

Joram did. Mapper set his rifle case against a bare section of wall and stood there.

Cherek shook his head a long moment, his manner that of a parent who has finally despaired of his children ever accomplishing anything in life, then leaned forward, making his chair wheeze again.

"Here's the situation," he said. "As you know, this world of Tarhassan has recently declared itself for the Separatists, a surprise to the Republic."

Joram frowned. "Why didn't the Republic Intelligence team here warn us about their defection?" Every world within the Republic had an Intelligence team, even if that team consisted of a pair of agents who spent most of their time watching broadcast entertainments.

"Aha!" Cherek said. His expression suggested that his children might not be irredeemable after all. The Intelligence team here disappeared six days before the government announced for the Separatists. Our goal istofirid him."

"Him?" Tinian looked offended. The entire team here was just a him1"

Cherek nodded. "His name is Edbit Teeks. His partner retired a few months ago, and, things being so settled and tame here. Intelligence didn't get around to worrying about a replacement for several weeks. It was during those weeks that the Clone Wars began. At that point, allocation of resources became problematic."

"So," Joram asked, "what do we know about this Teeks' disappearance?"

Livintius shook his head. "No, no, no. That's not next."

"Not next?" Joram repeated.

"On the agenda." At Joram's blank stare, Livintius continued, "I've drawn up a formal agenda for this meeting. Here." He reached behind his seat, causing the furniture to whuff and sigh, then leaned forward to hand Joram a printout.

Joram glanced over it. It began:

Republic Intelligence Meeting

Tarhassan, Quarters of Cherek Tuhm

1. Gathering of Operatives

a. Cherek Tuhm

b. Tinian Hanther

c. Livintius Sazet

d. Joram Kithe

2. Pre briefing Synopsis

a. Where We Are

b. Why We're Here (Mission Objectives)

3. Getting to Know You

4. Formal Briefing

a. Objective Summary

b. Resources

c. Break for Snacks (Optional)

d. Presentation of Pre-Gathered Information

Joram read on and on. The agenda, printed in small text, filled the page.

"I apologize," Livintius said, "for not including the name of your partner on the agenda. I didn't know he'd be coming. You can be certain that the updated version will include it."

Joram cleared his throat. "I don't mean to criticize..."

"Don't feel at all bad about it, young man," Livintius said. "I'm always striving to improve my work. Take your best shot. The worst that can happen is that my next agenda will be even better."

"Yes. Well, I have no objection to the agenda as such. But let's say that you were nabbed by our counterparts in PlanSec, Tarhassan Planetary Security, shortly after you printed this. They'd know the rest of our names and where we were meeting. They'd be able to grab us up, too."

Livintius sat back, his brow furrowed, thinking hard. "I'll be... You're entirely correct. That would have been disastrous. Let's bring this up again when we get to 'New Business.'"

"You're, um, new to Intelligence, aren't you?"

Livintius brightened. "Which brings us right into Item Three, Getting to Know You. Yes, I am. As are we all."

Joram looked at the others. "How's that again?"

Tinian smiled. "Well, not to put too fine a point on it, but our Intelligence careers, and the creation of this temporary unit, are all results of your success on Pengalan. Yes, we know who you are and what you've done, Joram."

What Joram had done - was accompany a military expedition to the world of Pengalan. That campaign to win the world back from the Separatists

had failed, and Jorarn had been stranded there with a squadron of clone troopers. Joram, theri an accountant from the Ministry of Finance, had worked with the troopers, and their combined skills had allowed a number of them to get off that world alive. "So, in running away successfully, I..."

"No, not that." She shook her head, and her voice took on a condescending tone. "Your success demonstrated the degree to which an operative from Finance could contribute to Intelligence operations. Immediately after your report was evaluated, a subcommittee of the Republic Senate recommended that Intelligence begin a pilot program to evaluate the suitability of experts from other government divisions."

Joram felt his heart sink. "So not one of you was in Intelligence prior to my mission on Pengalan."

"That's right," Cherek said. "Though the intensive training we've received, our personal competence, and pure intellect more than makes up for any deficits of experience."

"More than make up," Livintius said. "Subject-verb agreement, Cherek."

"Yes, yes."

Joram decided that it might undermine the group's confidence if he were to cradle his head in his hands. Sobbing would probably make the situation even worse.

"So," he managed to choke out, "where are you all from, originally?"

"Ministry of Licenses and Permits," Cherek said. "But I've been training in hand-to-hand combat all my life. I've been the Ministry of Licenses and Permits hand-to-hand combat champion for eight consecutive years."

"I'm from the Department of Health," Tinian said, pride in her voice. "Flora. I specialize in grains."

"I've held positions in both the Ministry of Public Information and the Ministry of Education," Livintius said. "In truth, I've spent my entire adult life in the hallowed halls of education, and let me tell you, transferring to Intelligence

was just the opportunity I needed to couple practical experience with the cool perspective of academia."

"Your background we know," Tinian said. "And your partner?"

"Mapper's an ex-trooper," Joram said. "He's been on the front lines,"

Cherek turned a cold look on Mapper. Joram supposed the man felt threatened by the presence of someone with actual, rather than tournament, combat experience. Mapper ignored him.

"Well," Cherek said, "I think we've accomplished Getting to Know You. Next?"

Livintius beamed. "Item Four, Formal Briefing. Sub-Item A, Objective Summary."

Cherek took over. "We know that Edbit Teeks was reported missing by his lover, Zazana Renkel, a local woman; her statement indicated that she saw him being grabbed off the lane in front of her quarters. A little research into her background reveals that she's a member of PlanSec. And since the Book says that an Intelligence operative should not get emotionally involved with locals, we can presume that Teeks believed he was working her without her knowledge when she was, in fact, aware of his true role and working him. Obviously, she arranged for his arrest."

Joram frowned. "If she had him grabbed, why file a report about his disappearance and leave a trail back to herself?"

"Aha!" Cherek said. "To establish her innocence in the face of further inquiry, of course. And she obviously fooled you. But not me. Now - where was I?"

"Arranged for his arrest," Tinian said. "Do keep up, Cherek."

"Right, right. So our task is to grab her and force her to tell us where he is. Once she's done that, we'll find it easier to reacquire him."

Livintius nodded sagely. "Rescue missions are much more efficacious when one knows where the object is being held."

Joram listened with half his attention. The other half struggled with the sense of doom that had descended on him, and with questions: Was it simple incompetence or some sort of secret effort to undermine the Republic's Intelligence community that had led to the establishment of this team? And what crime had he, Joram, committed to be attached to it?

"No more new business?" Cherek asked.

The others all shook their heads, even Mapper. The trooper was finally in one of the chairs. He looked as though he were contemplating the heat-entropy death of the galaxy.

Joram was numb. His butt was numb from hours of sitting. His mind was numb from hours of adherence to parliamentary procedure.

Cherek heaved a happy sigh. "Final item, then. Setting up a time and place for our next meeting. I recommend reconvening here, immediately after we've grabbed Zazana Renkel."

"When will that be?" asked Livintius.

"We can't be sure," Cherek said. "The operation to grab her is pretty simple, but there are time-related variables."

Livintius' mouth turned down. "These minutes, which constitute a portion of our official report, would be better if we could indicate a precise time."

Cherek considered. "You're right. How about midnight, local time, or immediately after we return from grabbing the Renkel woman, whichever is later?"

Livintius brightened again. "That'll work."

"Before we vote on that," Tinian said, "how about we set it for after we've interrogated the Renkel woman? That way, we'll have set up the inclusion of her responses into the next set of minutes."

"Ooh," Livintius said. "Good idea."

"Let's make this march," Cherek said. "Incorporating Tinian's revision, all in favor?"

"Wait," Tinian said, "no one seconded."

Livintius raised his hand. "I second."

"All in favor?" Cherek repeated.

There were five ayes.

"Move to adjourn," Cherek said.

"Second," Tinian said.

"All in favor?"

There were five ayes.

"Before we go," Cherek said, "everyone get into whatever you use for stealth-dress, hit the fresher, and visit the snack table again." He heaved himself upright, his chair sighing in relief, and headed toward one of the other rooms in the apartment Tinian moved off toward another room, and Livintius materialized beside the snack table.

Joram looked at Mapper. "Kill me."

"You kill me first."

"I'm senior, and I want you to kill me."

"Cherek's the mission commander. Let's both kill him."

"I second. All in favor?"

There were two ayes.

Joram decided that Tarhassan was a pretty world by night as well as by day. As he and his team cruised the skyways of the city of Nehass, he could see

a horizon-to-horizon vista of lights and buildings. The Tarhassans were obviously fond of colorful illuminations: One neighborhood would have pole-suspended streetlights in green, another in orange-yellow; the business district had many buildings that rose to altitudes of sixty or eighty stories, their curved architectural elements and beveled corners subtly lit in blue.

In the dark, however, he couldn't see all the civic activities he'd glimpsed on his initial trip to Cherek's quarters-the construction of hardened gunnery bunkers, the drilling of infantry, the setup of watch-stations on tall buildings, all part of the planets preparations for war.

In fact, he could enjoy only a portion of the night view, stuck as he was in the rear seat of the closed-top airspeeder. Cherek insisted on controlling the vehicle, and Livintius had shrieked "Gunnery seat!" as soon as they approached the vehicle. Consequently, Livintius had some sort of right to sit in the front passenger seat, so Joram and Mapper were stuck in the back with Tinian.

Crammed in the back was more like it. The airspeeder was a compact model with powerful engines, but it had a passenger compartment ideally suited for two adults in front and shopping bags in back.

Joram said, "Where does this Renkel woman go?"

"Eh?" Cherek said.

"There's really not much room for a hostage back here. How big is the cargo compartment?"

"No cargo compartment," Cherek said. "We rented this one for speed."

"And style," Livintius added. "Intelligence agents should have style."

"Besides," Cherek said, "she's not a hostage. She's a prisoner of war."

"So where does the prisoner go?"

Cherek and Livintius looked at one another. "Across your laps?"¹ Cherek said.

"I don't think so," Joram said.

"I'm the mission leader, and I say..."

"We'll vote on it, as usual. But there're three of us in the back, and we're the ones who'll have her across our laps, so I predict we'll all vote against." Joram got an immediate nod from Mapper, and, after a moment of consideration, a matching nod from Tinian. "See?"

Cherek sighed, vexed. "All right. We'll put Tinian up here between me and Livintius. Then you can have the hostage..."

"Prisoner of war," Livintius corrected.

"...prisoner of war between you. That way everyone's equally uncomfortable. Ah, here we are."

Cherek pushed the controls forward and sent the airspeeder into a power dive. Joram grabbed at the restraining straps. They held him in place but somehow let his stomach drift alarmingly within his body. The ground got bigger fast, its landspeeders starting as distant toys but growing in seconds to fast-moving traffic.

Joram looked over at Mapper; the trooper was holding on to his own straps with one hand and the seat back in front of him with the other. and Tinian was desperately holding on to him.

Then the world tilted again, and the landspeeders they were diving toward became landspeeders rushing straight at them. Joram felt the airspeeder shudder as its hull scraped the ground. They were skidding, turning the world beyond the windscreen into a whirl of lights that wobbled and shook. Finally they were still.

"Good job," Livintius said. "Not far from a parking slot." The aging academic seemed calm, although his skin had become reddish. It now began to fade back to its normal hue.

They were on a landspeeder lane, parked at an incorrect angle a meter from the raised walkway on one side. On the other side was a residential building. Although a midget by Coruscant standards, it rose high enough to loom over surrounding residences, twenty stories at least, and had a marquee

sign on the front that read "Liezder Towers." A moment later the words faded and were replaced by "Coruscant Living at Tarhassan Rates."

"I'm going to throw up," Tinian said.

"Wait until we get back to my quarters," Cherek suggested. "Now, we have to-what's the sub-agenda, Livintius?"

"Item One, enter the building without being seen. Two, eliminate anyone who sees us. Does that mean we get to kill them?"

"If absolutely necessary."

Livintius offered a sigh of satisfaction. "Three, determine which quarters belong to Zazana Renkel. Four, proceed to that set of quarters. Five, enter those quarters. Six, determine whether Renkel is there. And now we branch. If she's there..."

"That's enough for now," Cherek said. "Let's start on the operational details. Entering without being detected."

"There she is," said Mapper.

"We could pretend to be comlink repairers," Tinian said. "We'll need to acquire service uniforms. We'd enter the lobby and tell the security personnel that Renkel has reported a comlink outage."

"So he calls her on his comlink, and she denies it," Livintius said.

Cherek shook his head. "Back it up a step. Before that, we kill the power to the building so the comlink outage is plausible."

Tinian considered. "Then we'd need to be power-grid repairers, wouldn't we?"

"There she is," Mapper said again. He was pointing through the air-speeder's transparisteel windscreen. A woman, tall, lean, and dark-haired, dressed in a dark blue uniform with orange trim, was thirty meters from the front of the building and approaching it at a rapid walk.

"Yes, yes," Cherek said, "Livintius, when she goes in, you can strike Item Six and the 'she's not home yet' branch. Now, how do we get to the building's power controls?"

"But we can grab her now," Joram said.

"What, and spoil the plan?"

Joram growled to himself, a credible imitation of a holodrama rancor. "Mapper, go get her, standard talk and pop."

"Thank you," Mapper said. The relief in his voice suggested he'd been given a reprieve from a death sentence. He hit the button beside him, and the airspeeder door slid up and out of the way.

"Wait, wait," Cherek said.

Mapper didn't wait. He unstrapped himself in an instant, untangled himself from Tinian's grip in another, and moved toward the woman.

Joram took a look around. There were pedestrians on this walkway and others on the one opposite, but none within forty or fifty meters. He drew his Intelligence-issued blaster-his primary weapon, not the holdout weapon-and switched it over to its stun setting.

"You can't do this," Cherek said. "You can't just jettison the plan we spent so much time creating. That way lies anarchy and confusion."

"He's right, you know," Tinian said.

"You're demonstrating a marked tendency toward rebellion and aggression," Livintius said.

Tinian looked thoughtful. "A dietary imbalance could be contributing to your bad attitude, Joram."

Joram ignored them. Over on the walkway, Mapper and the woman now stood together. Mapper gestured up and down the landspeeder lane like a lost tourist, a role he'd played before. Joram steadied his blaster in the viewport frame of the aircar and squeezed the trigger.

A blast of light sizzled across to strike the woman in the torso. She jerked in a full-body spasm and began to fall backward.

Mapper caught her, swinging her arm up over his shoulders, tucking her in close to him as though she were a close friend who'd had too much to drink. Still talking, Mapper hauled her back toward the airspeeder.

Joram lowered his blaster out of sight and took stock of the potential witnesses. Several of them had obviously heard the noise of the blaster and were looking around. Two, not far away, were staring at Mapper and the unconscious woman in some confusion. But there was no visual evidence to convince them that a crime was being committed. Tinian, you need to be in the front seat."

"Right." She snapped out of what looked like a momentary trance. She slid out Mapper's door and moved around to stand beside the front passenger door. "Livintius, let me in."

The aged Falleen opened it and stood as Mapper reached the airspeeder. This is very irregular..."

"Gunnery seat!" Tinian said. Her face was suddenly alight with a victorious smile.

"Oh, blast you." Livintius got back into the airspeeder and slid over to take the middle seat. Tinian hopped in beside him, looking smug.

Mapper levered the unconscious woman in through the open door. Joram dragged her in beside him; Mapper crowded in and sealed the door. "Ready to go," Joram said.

With a snarl, Cherek returned his attention to the controls. In a moment they were airborne. "Joram, I'm going to report your insubordination and insolence to our superior as soon as we get back to the safe house. And you'll be shipped out of here with a black mark on your record. Or you can promise not to countermand my explicit orders, or the explicit plans worked up by this committee, ever again. What's it going to be?"

"So my experience and initiative, which have saved you hours and limited danger to this unit, don't mean anything to you."

"No, they don't. You're not our intellectual equal. Your experience is obviously irrelevant and your initiative is nothing but rebellion. Now, you can obey or go home in disgrace. What's it going to be?"

Joram set his jaw. He wanted Cherek to send him home. It might keep him from getting killed.

But then Cherek, Tinian, and Livintius would foul up their mission, and they would be caught or killed. Maybe Mapper, too. Cherek hadn't said anything about sending Mapper back. And if he ordered Mapper to stay, the loyal and determined clone trooper might just feel obligated to obey.

"Well?" Cherek repeated.

Finally Joram was able to work his jaw again. "All right," he said. "I promise."

"Not good enough. I want your word of honor. Repeat my instructions back to me so we're all on the same item on the agenda."

Cherek's neck looked very vulnerable. Joram could reach up, give the man's head a twist, and snap it. He had been taught how.

Every word was like a stone he had to cough up from his guts. "All right. I give my word of honor that I will not countermand your direct orders or the agreed-upon plans of this... committee."

"Good enough," Cherek said. "For now."

"I don't know where he is," the woman protested.

She was in one of the chairs in Cherek's rented quarters, and just binding her there had been quite a feat. The billowy furniture had no loops, holes, distinct legs or other components that would permit ropes to be firmly attached, so instead of ropes they'd had to use broad silver binder-tape. Layer upon layer of the stuff adhered her limbs to the furniture. More layers crossed her forehead, holding her head back against the puffy headrest.

Zazana Renkel was a good-looking woman, Joram decided, not holo-drama beautiful, but every-man-working-with-her-would-gravitate-to-her attractive, with dark brown eyes and a manner of expressing herself that suggested intelligence. She was doing what she could to hide the fact that she was very afraid.

Of course she was afraid. Joram would be afraid, too, if he were being interrogated by five masked lunatics.

The masks were cheap rubber things Livintius had bought. They all bore the same face, a broad set of male features marked with horizontal bands of war paint in red, yellow, and black. Livintius had said that they commemorated a hero from Tarhassan melodramas. So in addition to everything else, the spies were interrogating the woman with the face of one of the local cultural icons.

"Don't pretend you didn't know Edbit was with Republic Intelligence," Cherek said.

Renkel's eyes opened wide. "What?"

Joram sighed silently. In his peripheral vision, he saw Mapper begin to bang his head on the wall.

"We don't much care for liars, you know." Cherek drew a deep breath and expelled it as if banishing the demons of petty irritation. "But we might forgive you if you tell us where you're interrogating him."

"I don't... I didn't... I really don't..."

"Oh, come on," Cherek said. "Don't tell me you didn't get lots of praise and a big bonus for bringing in the sole Republic Intelligence agent on your planet."

"But..."

Joram grabbed Cherek by his shirt and yanked, hauling the man down the short hall and into the ground-floor bedroom. Cherek uttered a protracted "Hey..." as he was drawn along.

Joram slid the door shut behind the two of them and pulled his mask off. He tried very hard to keep his voice reasonable. "Cherek, do you know what you just did wrong?"

Cherek pulled his own mask off. His face was flushed, but it looked as though he was merely overheated from the mask. "You're walking dangerously close to insubordination again."

"No, I'm within the parameters of my promise. Listen. In the course of this interrogation, you've given her more information than you've received. If she didn't know before that Teeks was Intelligence, she does now. And even if she did, she might not have known that he was the only Intelligence officer on-world... and she does now. You see?"

Cherek considered. "Uh,..damn."

"So when we go out there again, either I can take over the questioning-"

"Or I can continue, implementing your suggestions. Which is what we'll do. Thank you." The last two words sounded slightly less grudging than usual.

Joram turned away, put his mask back on, and slid the door open again.

In the main room, Renkel was saying, "So Tarhassan rates only one Intelligence officer? Total? I mean, not even support personnel?"

Livintius, his voice soothing, said, "Don't take it so hard, young lady. I'm sure you're really a wry dangerous world at heart. There are five more now; is that better?"

Behind Joram, Cherek said, "Livintius, you idiot."

Everyone in the room turned to look at him. Joram, seeing Mapper's eyes widen behind his eye-slits, also turned.

Cherek's face was now flushed with anger as well as heat. Joram could see this because the man's mask was still in his hand.

Cherek charged forward, grabbed Livintius by the arm, and hauled him back into the bedroom. Tmian followed.

Mapper put his head into his hands. His shoulders shook as he tried to repress sobs.

Joram returned to the bedroom and listened to Cherek repeat Joram's own words of a moment ago.

As Cherek reached the end of the spiel and took a breath, Joram said, "And there's another problem. Now she's seen your face and heard Livintius' name."

"Eh?" Cherek looked at him, then glanced at the mask still in his hand. "Oh. Yes, that is a problem."

"She can identify us," Livintius said. He sounded breathless. He pulled off his own mask. His eyes were shining. "We have to kill her."

"Wait, no," Tinian said.

Cherek looked uncomfortable. "I don't know."

"We're not going to get anything more out of her," Livintius said. "She's tough. Let's kill her now."

"That's not right," Tinian said.

"Not a good idea," Joram said. "You and she both belong to the same intelligence community, even though you're on opposite sides right now. But in six months, five years, you may be working together... or you may be on opposite sides but have a common enemy. You'll need to have relationships with people in the trade you can trust-within limits. People you know won't kill unnecessarily."

Livintius shook his head, vigorous in his new desire. "This is absolutely necessary," he said. "She can endanger our mission and our departure from this world. We have to kill her. Kill kill kill."

Cherek's troubled expression cleared. "I hate to say it, but Livintius is right."

"Have you ever killed a prisoner of war?" Joram asked.

"Well," Cherek said, "of course I've killed. I am very..."

"Proficient in the combat arts," Livintius and Tinian said.

Cherek glared at them.

"But have you ever killed a prisoner?" Joram continued. "Someone who is helpless?"

"No."

Livintius and Tinian also shook their heads.

"Do you want to?"

"Well, it's not... sporting," Cherek said.

"Though it would be interesting to watch," Livintius said.

"Then leave it to Mapper." Joram looked toward the living room as if he could see through the intervening walls. "He's a merciless killer. He'll not only eliminate her, he'll dispose of her in such a way that they'll never find the body. He's very fond of construction sites and duracrete foundations."

"Ah," both men said, new wisdom and respect in their voices, Tinian said nothing. She glared at all of them.

Joram put his mask back on.

"No need for that now," said Cherek.

"Yes, there is. If we all three go out there with our masks off, she'll know that we intend to kill her. She's a cunning PlanSec operative, remember?"

"Oh, right." Cherek nodded in confused agreement.

When they returned to the main chamber, Mapper was kneeling beside Renkel's chair. She was talking,

"...snatched him off the street. I was walking home as usual and couldn't catch up to their speeder. I don't know why he was taken. And I don't know why you've taken me. I'm only a civilian employee. I don't have access to any important information. I do statistical analyses of criminal activity databases."

"Ooh," Livintius whispered. "Now I'm sorry we have to kill her. The conversations we could have..."

"Shhhh," Cherek cautioned.

"So," Renkel continued, "he couldn't just have been using me. There would be no point to it, would there?! think he loved me. I know I love him." There was desperation in her voice, and she stared into Mapper's half-concealed eyes as if seeking affirmation in them.

"I suspect you're right," Mapper said. "I mean, the most he could get from you would be-what? Identification documents that would get him into your building?" Renkel nodded, and Mapper continued, "And if that was all he wanted, then he'd have taken it and left you. Correct?"

"Yes!" There was relief in her voice.

"So I'm sure his feelings for you were genuine," Mapper said.

"Do you think he's hurt?" she asked.

Livintius said, "Probably being tortured. Do you think he'd stand up well to torture?"

"We don't torture people!"

"Of course you do," Livintius shot back. "Everyone but the Republic tortures captives."

"He's kidding," Joram said. "You'd know better than we would, right?"

Renkel nodded again.

Mapper, his voice soothing, continued, "So he's been locked up, and he's fine, and he's waiting for this war to be over so he can rejoin you. It's as simple as that,"

Renkel let out a long sigh of relief. "How much longer are you going to hold me?"

Joram moved around behind her and silently drew his blaster. He checked to make sure that it was still on its stun setting.

"Not long," Mapper said. "You've been very cooperative..."

Joram aimed. Mapper stepped back and away from the woman. Joram shot her again and watched the balloonlike chair convulse as the shock hit her system.

"It might be better to kill her now," Livintius said, his voice breathy. He pulled his mask free.

The others followed suit. Joram shook his head. "Forensics might detect minute traces of carbonized flesh in this chamber if we did. Belter to kill her well away from here."

Mapper stared at him, wide-eyed. Joram allowed a sinister smile to play across his lips. "Like those guys we took out to get into the spacecraft bay on Pengalan. We'll do the same to her... only worse."

Mapper thought about it and his expression cleared. They'd done nothing more than hammer those two men unconscious and leave them tied up. "So I'll need..."

"Just a blaster pistol...and the medical bag." Joram tried to make the two words sound as though they'd originated in some mythological hell. In his peripheral vision, he saw Tinian shudder. Livintius smiled.

"Til come with you as backup," Joram continued, "if the boss permits I expect the three of them will all be needed to work out the operational details for the next step of the plan."

"Right," Mapper said,

"What is our next step?" Livintius asked.

"Teeks was snatched by PlanSec," Cherek said. "Without question. So we need to plan a rescue raid on the main PlanSec building here in the capital. They wouldn't imprison him in any place less important."

"We're working for idiots," Mapper said. "And you promised to do everything they said." He was in control of the airspeeder, maneuvering it at legal rates along well-posted sky-routes above Nehass.

Joram shook his head. "I promised to obey Cherek's orders and the dictates of their horrible committee. I didn't promise to do anything else they said. I didn't promise not to figure out how to get them to do what I want... which I have. And I didn't promise not to do things on my own. Speaking of which..." He opened up his datapad. "I'm bringing up a map. I want you to drop me off there."

"Beam it to the nav computer. What is it?"

"Edbit Teeks' home. I'm going to give it a close look while you make Renkel comfortable. That trio of irredeemables thinks that Teeks had no local resources, which is an impossibility I need to disprove. When you're done, come back for me,"

Mapper smiled. "Now I feel better."

Mapper dropped Joram off a short distance from the housing tower that had been Edbit Teeks' public address. Mapper returned to the air as soon as Joram sealed the door. It wouldn't do to remain on the ground long enough for a pedestrian to see the woman-shaped disposal bag stretched across the back seat. Renkel, under the influence of the sedatives from the medical bag, would remain asleep for hours, perhaps the better part of a day. Mapper would find a place to conceal her where she was likely to remain undiscovered until hours past the Intelligence team's departure from Tarhassan. Joram would ensure that the team would leave before tomorrow was very old.

Teeks' building was shorter and broader than Renkel's. Its duracrete face, stippled and dyed to resemble natural stone, was dark from age. The north face, thick with balconies, overlooked a park. No one walked in the park,

and guardsmen, dressed in the fluttery orange-and-gold livery of Tarhassan's armed forces, stood watchfully in the northeast and southwest corners. The west face, which was where the primary building entrance was located, had no balconies, but many broad viewports gave its residents a fine look down at the landspeeder lane below.

The building lobby was unguarded, wall sensors permitting access to its turbolifts. Renkel's pockets had yielded up a transpansteel cylinder containing many of the planet's coin-shaped magnetic access disks, and when Joram held the cylinder up to a sensor, the turbolift doors opened.

Teeks' quarters were on the sixth floor. His door, a powered slider, was sealed by a magnetic coupler marked "Planetary Security." Joram took a moment to assure himself that no one was moving down the floor's hallway, then went to work disengaging the coupler. This was one of many skills he'd acquired since joining Republic Intelligence, and the coupler, designed to keep the mildly curious out or alert security forces if the very curious forced their way through, soon disengaged. Then Renkel's cylinder of disks gave him access to the darkened interior.

The quarters were lightly furnished. The fact that there wasn't much furniture meant that there was not much wreckage to clean up; someone had put the place through an amateurish and destructive search. The two sofa-chairs in the main room, one a single and the other a double-wide, had been slashed open, their stuffing pulled free; no longer restrained by the chair coverings, the stuffing had swelled to three times or more its normal volume, making portions of the room look like an artificial fungus forest. The thick green foam-carpet on the floor contributed to the impression.

The table between the exterior viewport and the narrower sofa-chair had been knocked down. A table lamp with a distinctive swing-out glowrodarm was on the floor, toppled but intact. In the bedchamber, the plush, freestanding mattress had been shredded, and its swollen contents made the chamber appear to be full of the primordial ancestors of the main chamber's fungal growths.

The wreckage held little interest for Joram. It would have been thoroughly sifted through by PlanSec. It was not likely there would be anything for him to find. In fact, he was looking for one crucial thing the security forces were less likely to detect, and he'd already seen it.

From the bedchamber, he recovered an intact low table. He positioned this beside the front viewport, put the lamp atop it, swung the arm out so that the glowrod was directly in front of the transparisteel, and switched the lamp on. The glowrod was still intact, and suddenly the main chamber was illuminated.

The light was risky. There might still be security personnel on duty watching this place.

The lamp was a signalling device, used in a standard procedure to signal an agent's local resources. It was plausibly a reading lamp; Teeks could sit in the sofa-chair beside the viewport, keep the lamp arm near him, and read. But when circumstances called for it, he'd swing the arm out so that it shone in the viewport, as Joram had just done.

Joram sat in the ruined chair. He drew his blaster and waited.

A knock, light and tentative, awoke Joram. He reached over to turn the glowrod off, then called, "It's not sealed."

The hallway door opened. A diminutive male stood there, his silhouetted features indistinct. He moved in quickly, letting the door slide shut behind him. "Greetings," the man said, his voice deep, out of proportion to his small stature. "I'm not sure I have the correct building. I've come about the rental quarters?"

"No need for a cover story," Joram said. "The lamp signal was deliberate. You're a local working with Teeks. What do I call you?"

The silhouette sagged just a little, perhaps in relief. "Tharb."

"I don't think I've run into that name before."

"It's not a name. It's a code name. It's a bug. A Tarhassan bug."

"Ah. How long has it been since you've been compensated?"

"Since Teeks was taken."

With his free hand, Joram fished around in a pocket and brought up some credchips, generic ones he'd exchanged for gold at the spaceport, not traceable to him. He calculated their value against what he knew were standard rates for local informer services and put two of them on the table with the lamp. "You can have these when I'm gone."

"Thank you."

"Why was Teeks taken?"

Tharb shrugged. "PlanSec investigators showed up at the restaurant, Corgan's Gustatorium, where I usually make exchanges with him. I happened to be there."

You work there, Joram decided. Now I can find you again.

"They asked very specific questions about his visits to the restaurant, about anyone he might have met there regularly."

But no one could remember any patron he met regularly. And since you're free, no one remembered that you were his regular server.

"I raced over here as soon as I could get free, but I was delayed by circumstances."

You had to wait until your shift was over.

"And I saw them take him."

Joram considered. "By any chance, did you follow them when they took him away?"

"Yes, I did."

Joram added another two credchips to the little pile on the table. Either you sold him out and risked nothing by following them, or you're a daring resource and we badly want to keep you. "Where did they take him?"

"The main office of Planetary Security, downtown."

Joram managed to keep an expression of dismay off his face-an irrelevant effort, since his visitor couldn't see his features in the dark. Cherek, for all the wrong reasons, had been right about where Teeks was. It was going to hurt like hell to admit that. "Is there anything you can tell me about that building?"

"I can give you partial plans. Main entrance, interrogation areas, holding areas. Nothing about the vehicle bays, computer areas, anything like that."

You're an ex-convict who's been there as a prisoner, and are now working as a food server, Joram thought. "Good. On your data pad?"

"On my data pad."

Joram brought out his own datapad. "Beam it over."

Joram and Mapper reentered Cherek's quarters some three hours after they'd left. Mapper, coached in the role he was now to play, kept his features cold and still. Cherek, Tinian, and Livintius regarded the two of them with expressions mixing admiration with dread. Tmian's manner was weighted more toward horror as she watched Mapper. Joram smiled. Their expressions would really become alarmed if they knew that the supposed victim lay wrapped in blankets in the utilities shed of an abandoned construction site, sleeping off her drug-induced stupor

"It's done," Joram said.

"About time. I hope Joram didn't slow you down too much. Mapper." Cherek gestured at the chamber's table, which now was only half-covered with snack food. The other half was littered with sheets of flimsi covered in hand-scrawled notes. "We do have a plan for the next stage of the investigation. Voted on, sealed, and approved."

"Sorry we didn't wait for you," Livintius said. "But we were all in agreement..."

"And with three voting in unison, our votes weren't needed," Joram said. "But I have some news. I hope it doesn't interfere with your operational plans."

Cherek looked offended by the possibility. "What news?"

"The Renkel woman confessed all before the poison took hold." Joram offered up a shudder at the pretended memory. "She admitted that she'd turned in her lover to PlanSec. He's being interrogated at the mam facility. You were right all along, Cherek."

"I knew that."

"So what's our plan?" Mapper asked.

"Well, there are holes in it," Cherek said. There was weary admission in his voice. "And until we plug them, we can't launch our rescue. For instance, we need to know the layout of the building."

"Oh, I have that," Mapper said. "It was on Renkel's datapad. Just the section of the building she was familiar with. The cells and interrogation areas, mostly."

Cherek came half up out of his chair. "You still have that?"

"Of course. I took all her personal effects to dispose of separately. They're still in the speeder."

Cherek's smile suggested that he was ready to adopt Mapper and make him his heir. "Good work. Livintius, fill him in."

The academic Falleen preened, happy to be the center of attention. "Item One, Sub-Item A, Summary: Rescue Edbit Teeks from Planetary Security Building. Sub-Item B, Resources, The five of us, one rental air-speeder, this set of rented quarters, personal weapons and gear. Mapper, do you have explosives?"

"I do. We have only half a dozen shaped charges, though, all I could smuggle in."

"That might do.... Sub-Item C, Procedures. Dress one of us in simulated PlanSec uniform. That one accomplishes entry into PfanSec building, makes his way to an unobserved exterior portal, and admits the others. Seize PlanSec personnel and force them to lead the way to Teeks' cell. Force open Teeks' cell,

Exit building; necessary improvisation here. Exit vicinity. Make immediate trip to spaceport for extraction."

"And now that we have a real, not simulated, PlanSec uniform," Cherek said, "we know who's going to perform the initial intrusion. If you're up to it, Tinian. You're the only one even close to Renkel's size."

Tinian considered, then nodded. "I'll do it. That woman gave her life so that Teeks could be rescued. I'm not going to let that be a waste."

Her tone surprised Joram. Renkel's supposed death had obviously shattered her naivete. There may be some hope for you after all, he decided.

But he had to find some way to accompany her into the PlanSec buildings. Otherwise, she was not likely to get out alive.

In what elsewhere was the quietest hour before the golden-orange Tarhassan dawn, the landspeeder lane in front of the Planetary Security building was busy with a shift change.

Tinian gulped, exited the airspeeder, and mingled with the crowd. She marched up the green duracrete stairs to the building's arched entrance. Closely following Mapper's instructions, she walked fast but not conspicuously so, her attention apparently on the datapad in her hand,

As she neared the main entryway, she held up Renkel's identity disk, waving it with simulated unconcern in front of the sensor, and passed into the lobby.

There was no alarm, no outcry, no sudden surge of officers toward the lobby. Joram, in the back seat, realized that he was holding his breath. Finally he let it out.

"No matter how many times you do this, it's never easy, huh?" asked Cherek. His tone suggested that he was one weary veteran talking to another.

Joram gestured toward the entrance. "Let's stay here to see if anything bad happens."

"No, let's get to our waiting point." Cherek put the airspeeder in motion, moving a block down the landspeeder lane, pulling it to the streetside around the first corner.

Cherek's comlink beeped, indicating an incoming signal. He pulled it from its clip on his lapel. This is Grimtaash-One, go."

Tinian's voice, hushed, came across the comlink's tiny speaker: "I'm in the basement."

"That was fast. Basement? You're supposed to be headed toward the cell block."

"I found out my identity disk doesn't get me into the secure hall to the building's interior. But I saw a worker coming out of a door to the basement near the hall access. I kept the door from closing and he didn't notice. There's no one clown here. I can move around without being seen."

"Tinian," Cherek's voice was a pained whine. "That... wasn't... the plan. "

"I know, I'm sorry. That was all I could do."

Cherek's lips moved silently, and Joram recognized that the man was counting to ten again. This time Cherek got to fifteen before he said, "What about accesses?"

"I've found one door frame already, but it's blocked with a duracrete slab. It's hard to move around down here. It's all caged areas filled with boxes of what I think is old evidence and files." They heard a quiet, high-pitched sneeze over the comlink. "Sorry. Dusty, too."

"Let me know when you've got something we can use. Grimtaash-One, out." Cherek replaced the comlink on his lapel, then looked confused. "Did I call her Grimtaash-Two, or by her name, the first time?"

Mapper said, "Her name."

Cherek began counting again.

"I have a door," Cherek's lapel whispered. "It's heavy metal and it has all sorts of monitoring devices on it."

Cherek undipped the comlink again. "Good, good. I'm going to give you to Mapper. Maybe Mapper can talk you through disabling them. Mapper's a good agent."

Mapper asked Tinian questions about the security array on the door, then began providing detailed instructions on how to deal with the devices. Joram half-listened but kept most of his attention on the surrounding speeders and pedestrians. Traffic was increasing, and four people sitting for a protracted period in a parked airspeeder would eventually become conspicuous.

"I think I've got it," Tinian said. 'The last display is green now. It reads 'Clear.'"

"Good job," Mapper said. "I'm giving you back to the boss." He handed the comlink over. 'The door's about halfway along the north wall. She hears speeder traffic, so it's exterior,"

"We're coming for you, Grimtaash-Two," Cherek said. He exited the airspeeder. Mapper and Joram followed. Livintius scooted over to be behind the controls. He had been thrilled to be made the speeder-man, the unit's getaway specialist, for this operation,

On the short walkover, Cherek said, "Now, how do we get from the basement to the cell block?"

They walked in silence for a minute while Joram formulated his response. Finally he said, "I have an idea-a partial idea, anyway. But there's a problem with it that I just can't work out. So it probably won't succeed."

"Probably not," Cherek agreed. "Let's hear it."

"We have Livintius watch the front entrance for a few minutes. At the point a unit of PlanSec agents brings in one or more prisoners, we have Tinian and another one of us stand by at the basement door, peeking out. She and the other fall in behind the agents and their prisoner, and see if they can get into the secure hall on their shirttails. Livintius can run back to the speeder then."

"Ah," Cherek said. "But Tinian's the only one of us in uniform. Even if they let her in, why would they let the other one in?"

"He's her prisoner, see. Hands bound behind his back, he puts on a perpetrator face... you know."

Cherek nodded, considering. "So what's the insoluble problem with this plan?"

"Well, of the three of us, none of us is dumb enough looking, or disreputable enough looking, to pass as a criminal."

"Ah." Cherek thought about that as they turned the corner, crossed the narrow traffic lane between the security building and the building adjacent to it, and reached what had to be the access to Tinian's door - a flight of duracrete steps descending into shadow. The three of them looked around, making sure that no one was watching, and trotted down the stairs.

Chetek said, "Joram, it's time for you to redeem yourself. I'm sure you can pull off that role. It's almost no acting required."

Joram made his voice light, his tone naive. "You really think so?"

"I do." Cherek clapped him on the shoulder, then capped on the door.

Her hand on the small of his back, occasionally shoving to propel him forward, Tinian kept Joram close behind the trio of uniformed PlanSec agents and their prisoner, a spindly woman who persisted in complaining that she'd divorced the man, that he was now remarried on Corellia, that she had no Republic leanings.

The secure portions of the building seemed packed with PlanSec agents, all energetic, all discussing the war to come. Snatches of defense plans, evacuation plans, and retaliation plans drifted past. Joram knew that he had to be pallid and sweating but decided that it would merely lend authenticity to his role.

Then they were past the first set of offices and cross-corridors, leaving most of the crowd behind.

A uniformed officer up ahead-tall, balding, with a build like an athlete twenty years younger than his apparent age-noticed them. "What'ya got there, guardswoman?"

"Prisoner delivery," Tinian said. "From Dandahass, that's my station. Thisguy was named by one of your prisoners and wants to work a deal. He's a Republic Intelligence contact,"

"One of our prisoners?" The officer eyed Joram speculatively. Joram held his gaze for a moment but then broke eye contact as if unable to withstand the man's stare.

They were close enough now to the man that Tinian could drop her tone. "Yes, your guy is..." She consulted her datapad, unnecessarily. "EdbitTeeks. This one, VarpoPrabb, admits to being his main connection among native Tarhassians."

"Good, good."The officer gestured for them to follow, then led them down the corridor. 'Teeks. Fine work. Come into my office."

Joram and Tinian followed, Joram taking a; fast an impression as he could of the office. He saw a semi-opaque viewport for privacy, chairs that seemed skeletal compared to all rhe others he'd encountered here, a desk heaped with stacks of reports, datachips, odd-shaped knickknacks.

For the moment, they were out of sight of anyone in the hallway, Tinian drew her blaster-Renkel's blaster. "Don't move."

The officer froze. Joram could see him calculating-was it worth it to shout and warn his fellows when it might mean death? Was there any chance this woman would hesitate, not fire at all'

Joram kned the officer in the groin, putting all his mass into it. The officer folded forward. His groan was loud enough to carry, but the noise from the hallway was also loud. Joram twisted his wrists out of the bonds loosely wrapped around them and tapped the wall button; the door slid shut with a whoosh. Then he took a metal model of a PlanSec corvette from the desktop and brought it down on the back of the man's head. It took three blows, but the officer finally fell unconscious.

"Joram, I'm not sure I'm fit to do this," Tinian said. Her voice was shaky. She looked at the blaster in her hand as if puzzling out what to do with it next. "I'm not a killer like you and Mapper."

"We're not killers like us, either." Joram weighed matters. Compartmentalizing information was usually a good idea, but not when it caused distrust among a Hies one depended on for survival. 'The Renkel woman is still alive."

"What?"

"She is. Cherek and Livintius don't know. Listen, you're doing fine. Get this man's restraints from his belt clip and bind him. Then gag him." Joram reached down to pull the man's datapad from his belt pouch. "Let's find Teeks."

At this hour, the second-floor cell and interrogation area were lightly guarded and trafficked. Tinian, again working her prisoner-delivery story, put Joram in front of an outer-perimeter guard, then an inner-perimeter guard. Each time, while pretending to hand the guard her datapad with the documents on her prisoner, she lured the guard into reaching through the bars for it. Joram grabbed each man in turn, dragged him into the bars, and held him there while Tinian stunned him with Renkel's blaster. Then the identity disk of the officer they'd captured downstairs gave them access into the detention area beyond.

Finally, they stood outside the cell marked with the number that corresponded to Teeks. Joram could see through the transparisteel panel in the door; a middle-aged man of medium build, a light and unkempt beard on his face, dressed in prisoner pastel violet, was asleep on the cell's bunk. On the far wall, a high viewport admitted exterior light. Joram waved the officer's identity disk in front of the door sensor, but its readout remained resolutely red.

Joram keyed his comlink. "Grimtaash-Five to One, come in."

"This is Grimtaash-Four." It was Mapper's voice,

"Four, where's One?"

"Asleep."

Joram grinned. "How'd that happen?"

"I didn't make him any promises, Five. He bumped his head,"

"Right. We're just outside the pickup point. We're going to need a distraction as soon as possible. A big, loud one. Do that, then exit. We'll be coming out on the north face, too. Three, are you ready to stand by?"

"Moving into position." Livintius's voice was unnaturally high. "What do you mean, he's sleeping?"

"Well, he's waking up. Still a bit groggy. And he's going to be read. I'll be ready with your distraction in thirty seconds."

"Set it off, don't wait for further instructions." Joram pocketed his comlink, then began setting up his explosive charge on the cell door.

Moments later, there was a muffled boom from below. It seemed to have little effect. There was a faint vibration in the floor, but there were no shrieks, no rattling of ceilings and walls, no cascades of duracrete dust from above.

Then the sirens started. They were shrill whooping noises, a constant cycle of auditory pain. The comlink Joram had stolen from the unconscious officer blared with its own message: "Intruders, basement level. We've had an explosion event. Repeat, an explosion event."

Suddenly there was a face on the other side of the viewport: Teeks, awake but sleepy, confused. Joram keyed the comlink on the door. "Teeks, get against the far wall, cover yourself with your mattress."

Teeks nodded and disappeared.

Joram set the timer on his charge, then he and Tinian withdrew along the corridor and around the first corner. Faces now filled most of the cell viewports. Some of these men and women were hammering, others talking, some pleading with nothing but their expressions. Joram ignored them.

He and Tinian were barely in place when the charge blew, hurling metal fragments all along the corridor. They rushed back into the cell.

Teeks rose from behind his improvised barrier. 'Tell me this is a rescue. "

"This is a rescue," Joram said. "I'm Joram. This is Tinian." He slapped his other explosive charge on the exterior wall just beside Teeks' knees, He set the timer for thirty seconds. "Tinian, cover the hallway."

Teeks moved away from the new explosive. He took his mattress with him. "Do you know anything about my girlfriend? Is she under suspicion? Underarrest?"

"No, she's not. She's safe." Joram moved away from the explosive, watched its timer count down, and something clicked into place for him. Renkel should be under suspicion. The fact that she's not suggests that PlanSec's certain that she's innocent. Which they shouldn't. Unless they have inside information about Teeks' personal life and knew she wasn't part of his team. But how would they know that and yet not know to pickup contacts like Thoib?

An agent would include personal details in his reports, but keep information about his resources, his contacts, secret.

So PlanSec has access to information from Teeks' reports to his Intelligence superior. Maybe to the reports themselves.

Tinian said,

"Five."

"What?"

"Four," she said.

"Oh." Joram joined her and Teeks behind the mattress.

"Three. Two. One,"

The wall blew out, this explosion sending duracrete dust into the air-mostly outward. Before the echoes had faded, Joram ran forward and peered out through the hole.

Below, the walkway and landspeeder lane were littered with-chunks of duracrete, Cherek's rented airspeeder was parked twenty meters off to the right, directly in front of the basement doorway access. Mapper and Cherek, the latter staggering slightly, were already emerging from the stairwell.

"Are you fit for a one-story drop?" Joram asked. He had to shout; his hearing wasn't what it should be, and he assumed that the hearing of his companions was similarly affected.

"Rather too late to ask," Teeks shouted. "But yes."

"After you," Tinian shouted.

Joram slid feet-first through the hole, its broken edges scraping across his back, and dropped. He landed on the unyielding walkway and continued his motion into a forward roll, a little clumsy-his back would be bruised tomorrow. But it was better than having a broken ankle or twisted knee. He stood.

Teeks hit the walkway behind him. rolled nimbly to his feet, and gestured up for Tinian to follow.

Ahead, Mapper, on the street side of the airspeeder, and Cherek, on the walkway side, had its doors open.

Then a uniformed PlanSec officer, a young man with dark hair, leaped as if catapulted up from the basement stairway and planted his blaster in Cherek's side. Even with his diminished hearing, Joram could hear the man's shout of:

"Do not move!"

Joram grimaced. It was amateur against amateur. No well-trained guardsman with a blaster would get that close to a perpetrator. And Cherek didn't have the sense to-Cherek raised his hands as if to surrender, then made a move to knock the blaster aside.

The guardsman fired. Cherek, his chest smoking, a surprised look on his face, fell. The guardsman adjusted his aim toward Mapper and Livintius.

Tinian's blaster shot struck him across the neck and shoulders. The man jerked and fell.

Mapper had Cherek in the back seat before Joram and the others reached the airspeeder. Livintius had the airspeeder in motion before they'd dogged the doors closed.

And they had a kilometer between them and the PlanSec building before the first security speeder left the building.

Mapper straightened from beside Cherek: bed. They were back in the dubious and temporary security of Cherek's chambers. "I think he'll live," Mapper said.

But Cherek did not respond to the hopeful pronouncement; his chest bandaged, his eyes closed, he remained in the sleep of the badly injured.

Teeks rose from the room's puffy chair. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but you'd better get off-world before they have enough information to catch you."

"We can't leave him," Livintius said. He continued to eye Joram with suspicion, as if Joram had shot Cherek by remote control.

"Yes, you can," Teeks said. "Get him into the speeder and I'll take him to a safe house. I have safe houses, cover identities, money accounts all over."

Livintius shook his head. "They're found to be compromised. By your dead lover."

"Zazana doesn't know anything about my work." Teeks shrugged, "I expect to tell her about it when I propose to her."

Livintius pointed an accusing finger at Joram. "You didn't tell him..."

Joram put a finger to his lips to sbush the academic.

Joram didn't begin to relax until he could see Tarhassan shrinking in the holocam view on the screen in the transport's main cabin. In minutes, they'd be jumping to hyper space, headed for a planet that remained neutral as war flared up all around it. From there, they could make their way back to Coruscant. Meanwhile, he'd privately warned Teeks against communicating with Republic Intelligence or accessing accounts he'd mentioned in his reports- at least, not until Joram could form an impression of how Teeks had been exposed.

The sound of tapping distracted him from the screen. He looked over to see Tinian working on her datapad. "What's this?"

She gave him a smile.

"My report,"

"What?" He looked down at its diminutive screen. "It's not in proper outline format. Nor do I see any contributions from Livintius."

"He can file his own report. In the meantime, mine will become the official truth of the mission to Tarhassan."

"What is the official truth? So my truth matches your truth, that is."

"Cherek planned, Livintius and I researched, you and Mapper executed, all until the big show at the end. Then we all executed and Cherek got shot playing hero. I also mention that Livintius, Cherek, and I could use more training, some mentoring by senior agents. In any case, everybody did good."

"Did well," Joram corrected, absently. "You learn fast."

"I suspect I'm going to need to,"

He reached over to shake her hand.

"Welcome to Intelligence."

Republic Commando: Targets

Headquarters Special Operations. Coruscant: Arca Company Barracks.

"Go on," said Fi. "Shoot me. Do your worst."

He held his arms away from his sides, presenting a clear shot to his comrade

Atin raised the Verpine shatter gun and aimed two handed, his left hand steadying the grip

"You're all mouth, FI," he said.

Atin squeezed the trigger. Fi's armored breastplate puffed a cloud of coating with a loud crack, and he fell back against the wall of their quarters. Verps were silent except for the impact and the screaming that sometimes followed the blasts. Fi wasn't screaming. But behind his visor, his mouth was open in a silent oh of pain.

Atin stood over Fi and checked both the breastplate and the Verp's chamber before hauling him back to his feet. They took off their helmets and looked around for the spent projectile. Fi picked up a flattened disc of metal whose edges were split and curled back like a flower, and tossed it in the air for Atin to catch,

"Okay, the upgrade worked," said Atin. "But you can't blame me for checking. I spent a month in the bacta tank thanks to one of these."

Fi didn't trust Procurement any more than Atin did, not when there were more than 10,000 sets of costly equipment to upgrade. They'd griped about the expense, but now everything - from their armor systems to their DC-17 rifles - was hardened against EMP and Verps, the two weaknesses that had almost got them killed on Qiilura.

Fi slipped his helmet back on and rapped his knuckle plate on it 'Well, nothing short of a sustained laser cannon is going to give us a headache now.'

The door whispered open. Niner, all grin responsibility, stood in the doorway in his black body suit. Darman was behind him, armored up, helmet tucked under one arm.

"What was that noise?" Niner said.

"Testing the new armor. Sarge."

"Testing my patience more like." He made an irritated click with his teeth, just like Kal Skirata used to; Fi could see more of their old training sergeant's, habits in Niner with every passing day. He glanced around the room "You fired a weapon in here?"

"It's okay, Sarge. we were wearing helmets," Atin stood his ground. Sensible precautions often placated Niner. "You can't trust Procurement?"

'Well, game over. We've got trade. Armed siege at the GC spaceport."

"Don't they have civil police for that son of stuff?" Fi asked. "We'll be directing traffic next,"

'Not when there are hostages and one is a Senator." Niner held out his hand to Atin for the Verpine, studied it, and then handed it back. 'They've never dealt with anything like this before, and they heard we were the boys for the job."

Fi lifted his backpack from its locker. 'I didn't have anything special planned for this evening anyway." Atin was right: He was all mouth. He became two men again as he always did when it was time to roll - the commando who was eager to put his hard-won skills to the test and the scared kid who wasn't sure he'd be alive tomorrow. He found himself worrying whether he'd signed out the Verpine from the armory. How much trouble could an armed siege be, anyway? He had his Katarn armor and he - and his mates - could take on a small army.

They all knew what the final score would be, more or less.

Atin gave him a shove and tucked The Verpine in his belt. "After you."

Maybe Atin was thinking exactly the same thing.

Holonews Update, 1530: Senator Meena Tills is believed to be among six hostages seized by an armed gang at Galactic City spaceport. Police have sealed off the area and all city traffic and interplanetary flights are being diverted. Expect long delays. More later.

Galactic City. Coruscant. was amazing.

Fi leaned out of the police assault ship's bay with his DC-17 clunking against his breastplate at every swerve and lurch of the vessel. Wind whipped into the hold, flattening his hair and peppering grit against his armor and his face. He'd never seen so many brilliantly colored lights: The walkways and sky lanes stretched as far above him as they did below. No wonder they called this place the Abyss.

"Gel your head back in," yelled the pilot. "What are you, a tourist or something?"

Fi leaned a little further out, trusting the safety harness. "But don't you think it's amazing?"

"Yeah, every rotten, stinking shift," said the pilot weanly. "Get him back inboard, will you?"

Niner jerked on the line. "Fi, don't frighten the civvies." he said. "It's not nice. And put your helmet on."

Cloud cars filled the airspace. The Coruscant Security Force pilot was trying to edge the custom VAAT/e between crammed civilian traffic packed solid in three directions, cursing under his breath. The pulsing wall of the emergency klaxon and flashing lights were enough to make the dead clear a path. But nothing moved in the gridlock. Speeders almost scraping the bodywork tried to escape into gaps that weren't there: 25 meters of assault ship didn't fit well into the tight sky lanes.

All that Fi had ever seen of Coruscant was barracks and a compound bounded by security walls. None of the commandos had ever been on a run ashore, a social adventure that Skirata had said they should experience at least once in their lives. From the crew bay, he could see crowds of every species pressed up against barriers, brightly lit shops and bars and apartments, exotic

and unimaginable places that beckoned. Yes, he'd have that run ashore some day.

Omega Squad chatted on the privacy of their helmet comlink, audible only to each other. Fi dragged his gaze from the outside world and settled into the bitter, sweet cocoon of his helmet, at once both reassuring and confining.

"Receive schematics, people." said Niner. "And real-time view."

A display of lines and fly-through images filled Fi's HUD. The Image that Niner had transmitted from his data pad was the plan of the spaceport building; long walkways led off vaulted halls and service areas, cubes of offices lined corridors, and power conduits wove through the image in green light. Superimposed on top of the overview, a readme image of the main spaceport arrivals area showed knots of blue-armored Senale Guards and CSF squads in yellow vests crouched behind security barricades, some engaged in animated conversation.

A blue hologram figure of a thick-set man in uniform shimmered into life in the hold, a little paunchy but still looking like he could give as good as he got. "Commander Obrim here, Senate Guard, Can you see this. Omega?"

Niner spoke for them, "Got it."

"They're holed up in a customs clearance corridor, and they've threatened to detonate explosives. Two sets of doors. and we've left them control of one to stop them panicking and doing something stupid."

"How many confirmed?"

"Six passengers, and we're trying to get pictures of them." Obrim might not have played this game before, but he had some common sense.

"Witnesses report four perpetrators armed with blasters and carrying something in backpacks, which we have to assume are explosives. No ID on them yet, but they were all on the same flight."

"Any contact with the targets?"

A pause. "If you mean the gang, they've issued demands and we have a secure comlink established with them."

"And you have primacy?" Are you running the show?" Fi could hear the doubt in Nlner's voice. "I thought the city came under CSF jurisdiction."

"Not as long as I have a Senator and his aide in danger," said Obrirn. The hologram began to waver again. "Obrim out,"

The CSF pilot brought the assault ship to a sudden halt. The undersized black and white marble facade of the spaceport terminal shimmered with ruby under flashing police lights. The front of the building was a crush of speeders and other emergency craft, none of them making a good job of keeping an access corridor open.

"Can't get in any closer," said the pilot. "You'll have to rope it down the rest of the way."

"Don't wan for a tip." said Fi and wondered where he'd picked up the phrase.

"We are citizens of Haruun Kal. The Republic has fuelled the civil war on our world and now brings a fresh war to us. Remove your presence from our planet now, or your Senator and the passengers die. Now you know we can reach into the heart of the Republic." (Message sent to RHN newsroom by Nuriin-Ar, leader of the group claiming responsibility for the hostage incntent.)

Fi braced his legs, placing both hoots on the outside rail of the ship's troop hold. He gave the rappel line one last tug, to check that it was secure before dropping 15 meters to the wafkway, DC-17 ready in one hand, a sea of open-mouthed faces starrig up at him from behind the police cordon.

A sudden movement in his peripheral vision made him raise the rifle. A hover-cam with a RHN logo was sitting motionless 5 meters to his right, too far inside the cordon, outlined against the clean, white facade of the port. There was no point being covert ops if you were on the news and your target might be watching. The rest of the squad could see Fi's field of vision via an icon in their helmet links.

"I don't thlnk that carn's seen a Deece before," said Darman's voice.

Fi's boots hit the walkway and he aimed. The hovercam darted left then right in his scope, fast but not fast enough, "It has now."

A shout of 'hey!' followed the thwack of exploding hovercam. The rest of Omega Squad hit the ground and jogged toward the terminal entrance. "You shot my cam!" yelled a woman from the watching crowd. She was wearing a bright yellow tabard emblazoned with the word MEDIA in large letters. "You shot it!"

Fi touched his glove to his helmet in apology, just as he'd been taught, but he still thought it was a pretty good shot. "Oops. Beg your pardon, ma'am."

He jogged after the others, conscious of the staring crowd. Fi saw his armor as safe and welcoming. But the expressions on a couple of faces made him realize that ordinary people were scared by it.

And it wasn't just the civilians who found Omega Squad a riveting spectacle. The CSF and Senate Guard officers at the forward control point stared, too. Obrim stopped a head-to-head discussion with a CSF lieutenant and stepped back from the defensive barricade of baggage repulsors and portable blast shields erected 10 meters around the customs halt.

"I see you're tooled up." Obrim said, eyeing the DC-17s with a distinct air of alarm. He almost slid his modes; police issued blaster behind his back. "They're not driving Trade Federation tanks, you know."

Fi decided that the police had a lot to learn about sieges. You could do anything with a Deece: A turn of the wrist, and it was a sniper rifle, grenade launcher, or a regular blaster. You could even club someone with it if you had to, although Fi hadn't tried that yet. He checked the vibroblade in his gauntlet out of habit. and the shunk-shunk sound as it extended and retracted made Obrim flinch.

Niner made that annoyed click. Fi took the hint.

"Let's get a cam in there first so we can see what's going on," said Niner. He beckoned: Darman and Atin forward. 'Pictures, Commander? We need to know who to shoot.'

"You're a bit keen."

"If you're not a hostage, you're a hostage taker, and that means you're dead a few seconds after we go in. We hate to make mistakes."

"What do you mean by go in, exactly?" The CSF lieutenant stepped between them. A name tag on his vest said DOVEL. "I'm incident commander. I say how and when anyone goes in. We've got a Jedi coming down to negotiate with the leader."

Darman took his pack off his back and began pulling out coils of high-yield charges and detonators. He was staring at the security doors as if calculating. "We'll still get the charges in place, just in case."

"No, that's not how we do it," said Dovel. "We don't want the hostages char-grilled. No storming, no heroics. Not yet."

Obrim interrupted, "Senate Security Committee wants this ended fast to show Haruun Kal we're in control. They can't just walk in here, grab a Senator, and hold the Republic's finest at bay."

"Maybe the Republic's finest, or you to be exact, should have concentrated on ensuring secure transportation for Senators," said Dovel, "What about those other hostages? You want to tell their families that they got fired because you called in the heavy mob to save a politician?"

Niner waited, all mild, deceptive patience. Fi had decided on first meeting him that he was a misery-guts, but now he found him solid and reassuring, just the way a sergeant ought to be. "Let's be clear what we're trained to do, gentlemen. We go in and extract hostages by any means necessary. We don't ask for ID. We don't take targets alive. We don't avoid damaging the furniture. When you send us in, there is no happy ending," He paused as if waiting to see if the reality of the request had sunk in. "So we'll just wander around and rig the interrupts to the power and light, and you call us when you're ready to roll."

Atin took a couple of strip-cams from his backpack, each no bulkier than a sheet of flimsi. Fi switched to the internal helmet comlink. "You think they're real terrorists or Haruun Kal government agents upping the ante?"

Atin shrugged. 'I don't care as long as they fall over when we shoot them.' A commando's life was all clarity. Fi was glad he wasn't Ogrim - or Dovel.

Holonews update, 1700: The family of an elderly couple held hostage with Senator Tills have made an emotional plea for their safe release. Joz and Cira Larutur from Garql were on their way to see their first grandchild when they were seized. Other hostages have been named as customs officer Berin B'naian and Senatorial aide Vun Merett Jai, but the identity of the sixth hostage remains unknown.

Ogrim was talking on the comlink to Nuriin-Ar in carefully restrained tones while Omega listened in. Fi was concentrating on the sounds in the background with an intensity learned from growing up where everyone looked and sounded the same, distinguished only by minute variation; in tone and expression

He could hear the old woman's voice saying, "Oh Joz... oh Joz..." over and over very quietly. From time to time, he heard an equally quiet reply from the old man: "Don't you worry."

It made him uncomfortable. He wasn't sure why,

Ogrim let out a breath. "The Jedi's here."

Fi's stomach churned when he saw the distinctive red-trimmed visor of an ARC trooper captain through the grimy, white helmets of the CSF line. The line melted away for the ARC: Behind him trailed a human male in a very well-cut business suit, a young Twi'lek Jedi. and...

...a scruffy, wiry little man who looked old enough to be everyone's father, a man with a face as wrinkled as his clothes, buzz-cut gray hair, and a limp that didn't stop him from covering the ground like a racing odupiendo.

"Sarge!" said Fi.

Niner's head jerked up. "It is!"

Kal Skirata reached them a stride ahead of the ARC captain. He grinned up at Fi as if he recognized him but that was impossible. He'd had a hundred

identical young commandos in his batch. He couldn't possibly remember. He couldn't possibly see past the visor, either.

"Who let that vagrant in?" demanded Ogrim.

"That," said Fi, "Is the man who taught us all we know,"

Ogrim sighed. "We're screwed, then."

Fi touched his fingers to his helmet anyway, even if Skirata was out of uniform. "Sarge, what are you doing here?"

"Where there's trouble, Fi, there's always a job for me. Special security adviser now." Oh, he knew. How? How? "Nice new armor. Going on a date? And who's he?"

Fi followed Skirata's gaze. "That's Atin. Hang on, how do you...'

"Lads, this is Master Kaim and the Senate Head of Public Affairs, Mar Rugeyan. Fi heard Ogrim sigh again. "And ARC N-11. We all want the same outcome-hostages out, scum bags dead, traffic flowing again. Let's get to it."

Kaim looked like a youngster aged early by responsibility. He stared at the door behind the barricades and closed his eyes for a moment, lekku moving ever so slightly, hands clasped in front of him.

"I'm going to ask them to let me in to talk." Kaim said. "When I have their attention, I will help them decide to release the hostages and to talk to me, which will not be easy with Korunnai" He took his lightsaber from his cloak and handed it to the ARC. "I have to show goodwill and enter unarmed."

"You're nuts, sir," said Ogrim. "You're giving them another hostage."

"One with a choice. * said Kaim. "Captain, if I get inside, you have command here."

The captain just nodded once. Atin took the strip-cams and held one out to Kaim. "'If you get a chance, sir, try to leave this inside. Anywhere. Even If we can't get an image, we can pick up audio."

Kaim examined the stnp and tucked it in his sleeve, then took out his comlink. "Nuriin-Ar, can you hear me? Will you let me in so we can speak?"

The simultaneous chunk and uuiirrrr of 20 service-issue blasters powering up made Fi turn and aim in time to see the doors at the customs hall begin to part. For a moment, the commandos were a single wall of rifles with the two police forces. Slowly, the blade-thin gap opened wide enough for Fi to see a few huddled shapes inside.

Kaim went in.

GC spaceport terminal building. 1745.

Fi could see what Atin could see and hear what he heard. The squad had switched to the cam output within their helmets, and they were all focused on an unsteady image of folds of fabric and the muffled but audible conversation.

"Let these people leave," said Kaim. "You don't want to harm them."

"And no doubt you don't want to harm ordinary Korunnai, yet your interference does just that." The view from the cam shifted and Fi could see figures distorted by the wide-angle lens: four men, one in gray, one in dark green, one in light tan, and one in a loose, dark-brown coat. All had their faces obscured by black scarves. There were figures behind them, two groups of three, also with their heads covered in the same scarves. But they were the hostages, judging by their huddled positions and their clothing: out-of-date fashions from Garqi, a business suit, a customs uniform, a Mon Calamari Senator's formal robe, and a cheaper imitation of it.

Fine, thought Fi. His helmet was recording. I don't need to see your faces. I know what you wear, how you move, now you sound, and that's how /I'll know who you are when I blow your brains out.

Kaim's voice was soothing and reasonable. "These people need food and water,"

"That's the least of their worries." The one in gray; Fi noted his voice. The one in light tan turned to look at the Senator and told him to shut up. Green Man was holding his blaster left-handed. Detail. "Take a look at their baggage."

Tan Man - Fi now saw the targets as color coded-grabbed; the old Garqian man by his shoulder and dragged him across the polished tiles a little way from the wall on his backside. The old woman's voice whimpered. terrified. Fi could see now what Gray had meant by baggage: The hostages had small packs strapped to them.

"Six lives are a price worth paying, Jedi," said Gray. "We wifl detonate the charges."

"This wins you no sympathy. Mercy will."

"We don't require sympathy. Just your compliance."

"Let the old couple go, at least."

There was a pause. Fi wasn't sure where Kaim had managed to place the stnp-cam, but Gray's shrouded face came closer and Fi saw two pale eyes as if he was looking into them personally.

"Lying Jedi filth! Spy!" Gray hissed, and the sound and image crashed to static and black.

"Fierfek...." said Atin.

They heard the screams. They weren't only from an old woman. Then there was a thud and shouting..."Shut up! Shut up, or you die now!" - then silence. Fi looked to the ARC, rifle aimed at the doors: Darman raised the remote detonators in his glove, a mute request for permission to blow the doors,

"Hold fire." said the ARC.

The twin doors began to part and Fi, Atin, and Niner had their Deeces trained on the widening gap. Fi could see the different views through their scopes in his HUD.

"I said hold!"

Something tipped and rolled onto the polished marble and the doors sighed shut again. It was Kaim. Fi and Niner edged forward first, and the police closed up behind them. Fi wondered how much the hovercams and broadcast droids could see. Could the gang see them?

Kaim wasn't moving. Niner put out a cautious hand to pull back the Jedi's robe, and Fi saw a flicker of light and heard Niner catch his breath.

"Booby trap - counting down!"

Fi didn't think.

The police officers were right on top of him, unprotected.

He flung himself flat on Kaim's body, eyes tight shut so he wouldn't see the shattered face, wailing long fractions within fractions of seconds before a shock wave lifted him like a body blow and raw noise filled his helmet. He felt as if he'd been shaken hard in a metal box. For an instant, red light flooded his eyes behind his closed lids.

How long the next moment took he didn't know. But he could hear the ARC shouting, "Droid those cams! Do It! Now!"

He could hear yelling, so he wasn't dead. That was something.

Holoflash, 1758: A Huruun Kal group holding Senator Tills has killed a Jedi negotiator. All location cams have been disabled in a news blackout. but we've just witnessed horrific scenes as the Jedi's booby-trapped remains exploded in the terminal. It's thought a member of the elite Republic Commando shielded the blast with his body. Viewers might find the following images distressing.

"What do you use for brains, Fi?" Skirata hissed, supporting Fi's shoulders. "You're a di'kut"

Fi could feel bruises forming everywhere he had places He sat upright with some difficulty, "Thanks for the sympathy. Sarge. I'm fine."

"You trust that pretty armor a lot more than I would." Skirata suddenly shook him fiercely by the shoulder. "Don't you ever scare me like that again, son. You hear? Let the cops look after themselves."

It hadn't been a big device. Just enough to kill or maim a couple of people, but not enough to breach Katarn armor. He'd smothered the blast and the shrapnel that went with it. Fi hadn't been 100 percent sure at the time that the armor would absorb the energy from the blast, and now that the adrenaline had finished coursing through his veins he felt shaky.

The ARC stared down at him, fists on hips. Skirata kept calling him Ordo: Skirata insisted men had names, not numbers, whatever the rules said.

"Nice move." said Ordo.

"Nice skirt." Fi indicated Ordo's battle-scarred belt-spat, shredded at the hem like a flag that had been left too long on its mast. He wiped his armor, trying to forget what was smeared on the plasioid-alloy but the smelt kept reminding him. "Really suits you. Hand washable?"

Ordo's expression was hidden behind his visor but his tone wasn't. "It's a kama." he said, all Ice.

"Some day, Fi, someone's going to belt you one," Atin muttered. "And it's probably going to be Ordo."

He was right. But Fi didn't know any other way to keep his gut from shaking at times like this, it was how he coped. He was relieved and he was shocked, and now he had to get on with the job. He leaned on his Deece to get to his feet and saw that the cams and droids had gone: the illuminated displays in the terminal were black screens, and the amber emergency fighting was on.

So Ordo had deployed an EMP device to knock out the holocams. and it had taken out all the unshielded equipment around them too. Droiding. A crazy but necessary move. Fi thought, seeing as it might have triggered whatever explosives the gang had rigged. He linked into Niner's helmet and saw that he was running and rerunning the Images of the gang that Kaim had paid for with his life, memorizing the identifying details,

Rugeyan was looking around the terminal hall, chatting on his comhmk. The embodiment of pure calculation. "Okay, so we'll have to take the news conferences at the Chamber... any more bodies, and they go out via the back... I know, it's not good seeing Jedi body parts... the grunt was great, right?"

Ordo and Skirata looked at each other as if some common bond had sprung up from nowhere. Fi wondered if they had some commlink of their own: Skirata occasionally slipped something into his ear and removed it again. Ordo cocked his head but Skirata smiled lightly and without humor. He turned to Rugeyan and put a scarred hand on the sleeve of his nice, sharp tunic.

"Son," he said. 'I couldn't help noticing that you called my boys grunts. Don't do that again, will you?"

Rugeyan looked down at Skirata as if he'd noticed him for the first time and lowered the comhmk. "We want the Senator out now. Nothing else matters."

"I'm glad you pointed that out to me." Fi couldn't see what Skirata did next, but his arm dropped down and suddenly Rugeyan seemed to be taking a lot of notice of him. His eyes bulged visibly and a small uh noise forced its way past his lips. "Now that I have your attention, may I suggest that you remove yourself from the incident scene and let Captain Ordo and my boys do their jobs?"

Fi was mesmerized. Darman jogged up to the tableau of frozen pain. "Charges laid, Sarge. Ready to go."

Skirata's arm fell back to his side again, and Rugeyan inhaled sharply before brushing down his tunic and striding away with somewhat splayed legs.

"I'll remember that move." said Atin approvingly, "Vau never taught us anything like that."

But Vau had certainly taught Atin the exacting procedures for storming a building, Fi knew. He just wondered about Ordo. ARCs weren't team players.

"Fancy, a bit of action for a change, Captain?" asked Fi "Give yogr Deece a day out?"

"Don't worry, if your luck holds, I'll be right in front of you." said Ordo, toneless. "If it doesn't. I'll be behind you."

Fi thought about that for a few moments. Then he started wondering again why Nuriin-Ar and his cronies hadn't seized hostages in the transport before it landed: it was a better location to withstand an assault. The fools were facing certain death. They wouldn't shift the Senate's position. And they had to be stupid if they didn't realize that.

In the end, though, their intelligence levels wouldn't matter. He checked his Deece, rehearsing rapid changes between modes and aware that Ordo kept looking his way.

Holonews Update, 1830: The Haruun Kal government has denied knowledge of Nunin-Ar, leader of the group that's holding six hostages at Galactic City spaceport. But in an unusually robust statement, the Korunnai ambassador says she "fully understands the group's frustration and has urged the Republic to cease interfering in her planet's affairs."

One of the CSF officers brought a tray of caf in flimsi cups and handed Fi one first. A camaraderie had sprung up: Fi rather liked it. The cops actually seemed in awe of what he'd done, and he began to realize that it felt good to be held in that kind of regard.

"No cookies?" said Skirata, and took a cup.

The squad took their helmets off to drink. The officer seemed distracted for a moment, staring at their faces. "I'll see what I can do," he said.

"Don't wait for a tip." said Skirata. Fi smiled to himself.

Obrim and Dovel were observing a few paces away, and the group stared at the hologram of the terminal layout that Ordo projected into the space between them.

"It's an oblong room," said Skirata, and slurped his car. "No scope for anything clever. It's just going to be a matter of speed, force, and knowing who you're going to drop as soon as you're in there."

"But how are you going to stop them setting off the devlces?" asked Dovel.

"By slotting them before they can move." said Niner, "We've done this more than 100 times, and we know how each other thinks. This is probably their flrst time."

"And their last." Ordo dipped the finger of his glove through the shimmering virtual roof space of the customs hall. "I'll take the roof and keep the hostages still until we get bomb disposal in there to deal with the novices."

"All The hostages?" said Obrim.

"I realise the Senator is a priority."

Dovel chewed his lip thoughtfully, clearly a man who no longer wanted primacy in this incident. Fi thought that was a smart change of heart. If anything went wrong, he knew who would gel the blame now.

Ordo got up and tidied his rappel line before fastening it to his belt. "I'll get in position," he said. "And I'm switching to the general comlink channel. We go in at 1915. Darman counts us down, and Obrim's men kill all the lights, okay?"

Dowel's communicator chirped. He answered it and adopted that middle-distance state that peolplr had when they were trying to concentrate on something that they weren't expecting to hear.

"It's Nuriin-Ar." he said. 'He's asking for buckets, food, and wafer."

"Ah. The power of the need for a "fresher" said Obrim. "Looks like our hard men are softening."

"Even people who plan to kill engage in displacement activity," said Skirata. "I'll take the stuff in for you."

"I think I should he doing that, Sergeant." said Ordo.

"Yeah, like they'd succumb to your natural charm." Skirata began checking the pockets in his rumpled jacket. He extracted something that

looked hke a hearing enhancer - no, it was a hearing enhancer. Fi had always doubted that Skiraia's hearing was perfect, and now he knew. "Atin, can you pick up my enhancer's signal? I hate this thing. But it does come in handy."

"I'll do." said Atin stabbing his finger into a small receiver in his palm. "Are you really deaf?"

"A bit deaf. Just like you'd be if you hung around live-fire ranges without a helmet for too long."

"With respect, you'll just add another complication." said Ordo..Skirata sipped his caf without looking up. "If you mean that my boys will have to worry about shooting me by accident, then it's simple. They won't worry about it. Acceptable losses."

There was a complete silence in all their helmet comlinks for a telling and brief moment: no breath, no swallowing, no lick of the lips. Fi had a sudden mental image so awful that he didn't want to deal with it, not then,

Now it was all down to a well-rehearsed procedure. The charges would detonate, and they would lob in a few flashbangs so close together that it would feel like the same split second and plunge into reactions so automatic that they wouldn't pause to think what to do next or even know how much time had elapsed.

It was drilled deep, unthinking second nature. Fi longed for the moment instinct and training took him over again.

"I'll give you as many clues as I can, so listen hard," said Skirata, He fidgeted with the enhancer, making the same irritated clicks that Niner had. "And if I'm in the way when you come in, it's too bad, okay? You drop 'em all, straight through me if need be."

"Will do. Sarge," said Fi, and knew he would never do anything of the kind.

Galactic City terminal. 1855.

The doors parted. Fi, standing well back, stared down the scope of the Deece, not planning to take a shot but ready anyway. Skirata walked forward a few steps.

"Grilled food board." he said, arms held away from his sides, a picture of sub-servience. "And... umm... facilities."

Fi could see past him into the enclosed corridor: The hostages were still split into two groups. One of the targets stepped up to Skirata and placed the muzzle of his blaster against his forehead, Green Man, Fi thought, and made a mental note of the target's gait. It was a clean shot he couldn't take but not right then. The sound signal was fuzzy but audible enough.

"Put the buckets down and back off."

Skirata - short, wiry, forgettable, dragging his left leg - looked like janitor. Fi knew Green wouldn't see what was really there.

"What about the old couple?" said Skirata. "Don't you think they've had enough? Why not let 'em go? Take me instead."

Go on. Go on. Let him in...

Green paused and then gestured Skirata inside with the blaster. "You can keep them company," he said. "You're too altruistic for a delivery boy. We better search you."

The doors closed, "Stand by," said Niner.

They took up positions on either side of the doors. Fi and Niner to the left. Atin and Darman to the right. They could hear Skirata's breathing - remarkably controlled under the circumstances - and the occasional rustle of fabric. They were searching him. The enhancer didn't seem to get their attention, the device was too obvious.

"You okay, missus?" said Skirata's voice. There was a mumbled reply, probably from the elderly Garqi woman. "Lie down. You'll feel better."

"Shut up." said a voice, a new one. Tan Man, thought Fi. He'd know that voice the next time he heard it. You'll get yours. Nothing personal, just business.

They heard Skirata and the targets again. Fi paused. Every word counted: Skirata was probably risking death or at least a smack in the mouth with a blaster. Dun to speak at all.

"Here, son, let me have a look at that chrono... wow. that must have cost you something....what kind of business you in, then? Where you from? Mayro, eh? What's your name?"

"Quiet."

"Mayro, Never been there...you're N'zaet Nir, eh?"

"Shut up." Tan Man again.

"Okay, keep your hair on. I'll just sit here with Joz and Cira you... okay, sweet-heart? Don't worry..."

"Shut up." Thwack.

There were indistinct sounds of fabric rumpling and occasional breathy sobs in different voices. Fi tried not to think what the thwack was. But at least they had a name for the last hostage. It might matter.

He closed his eyes for a second and visualized the layout. Skirata probably had three hostages right next to him then. That left Senator Till's position unaccounted for as well as his aide. But it was better than nothing.

"Why was he repeating Mayro?" asked Darman "Where's Mayro?"

Niner's voice filled his skull. "It's Corporate Sector. Ordo, you ready"

Fi took a deep breath. He activated his helmet spot lamp and checked the chrono on his forearm plate. When the doors blew and Niner lobbed in the flashbang - bright and loud enough to stun most species for several vital seconds - he would swing 270 degrees to his left, step in, and aim, ready to take down the first recognizable target he saw. He'd done it time after time.

"Roof team ready," said Ordo. "Darman?"

"Ready." Darman raised his gloved fist. "In three. Two. Go."

Boom.

Light exploded out of the shattered doors and Fi ran into it, Deece raised. Time slowed into a sequence of freeze frames. A man in a green tunic, stunned. Squinting against the helmet spot lamp, shouting "No!" in a voice Fi had memorized as target, struggled to raise his blaster, and Fi put a single bolt through his chest. Spot-lamp beams crisscrossed the room. Debris rained down from the ceiling as Ordo crashed down a couple of meters from Fi, Atin dropped Gray with two shots.

A second of utter silence. Then someone in dark brown got up from the floor and Darman and Niner both fired at once.

"Everyone down! Down!" Ordo had his rifle trained on a group of hostages. "Stay still! Republic forces! And Darman was shouting, "Where's Tan?" Where's Tan?"

Fi's lamp swept the wall to his left, and he saw a light tan shape with Skirata half-across it, transfixed by the beam, veiling, "No, Fi! No!" Fi felt his finger compress the trigger without any intervention from his conscious mind, and time slowed down a hundredfold.

"Fi, no!" Skirata had flung himself across the tan-coated figure. "Hostage. Fi! Hold fire!"

Fi's finger eased back. The silence was sudden and total again, punctuated only by the patter of ceiling panels still falling in chunks on the tiled floor.

I nearly killed him. I nearly killed Skirata.

Ordo, standing over the hostages, suddenly fired his Deece into one of them and yelled at them to stay still. The emergency lighting came on again. Six civilians were frozen in terror.

"Fierfek" said Atin. "I thought he'd shot a hostage for a second."

"Get ordnance disposal in here before these people start going hysterical." said Ordo. "And get the Senator clear first."

There was a man in an expensive suit crumpled on the floor between the other hostages with a blaster beside him.

"He had a weapon," said Ordo "It's something of a giveaway. Must have swapped coats with our businessman,"

Now that all the targets were down. Fi could think only of Skirata's horrified expression in his spot-lamp beam. He taught down an impulse to tell him he was sorry. The old warrior was kneeling in from of the stunned hostages, now making reassuringly cheery comments that everything was going to be fine as long as they kept very still just a itttle longer. They were rigged to explosives and a dead terrorist was still smoking gently in their midst. And yet they kept still, and they kept qulet. People generally did what Skirata told them.

He glanced up at Fi. "Well, not exactly textbook. But dead's dead."

Explosives disposal officers moved in to check the backpacks and the squad moved out. Fi looked ai his chrono: The assault had taken less than 30 seconds.

He could feel the adrenaline ebbing while his body - which didn't care how trained he was - tackled the aftermath of the massive surge of hormone. His breath rasped hard in his ears as he sat down on a baggage repulsor.

"All clear." The explosives officer came out of the wrecked hallway with an open backpack that rattled as he walked. "And I mean really clear. These packs are just full of used comtink parts. Nasty bluff."

Skirata wandered over to Fi and sat down beside him. "We don't like practical jokes like that, do we, lads?" he said. He motioned him to take his helmet off. "Serves the stupid bunch of di'kute right."

Obrim stood at the blast-shattered doors, looking bewildered, "Is that it?" he said. "We prate around for more than three hours, and you clear the room in 60 seconds?"

"Twenty." said Fi automatically.

It all looked easy from the outside. It probably would have rooked great to the holocams. Fi could see only that he had come within an ace of doing what he never believed he could. If Skirata hadn't identified the man as a hostage. Fi would have killed both of them with a single round.

Sergeant Kal's nearly a father to us. How could I?

He took off his helmet and wiped his palm across his forehead, still unable to shake Skirata's image from his mind.

"You really would have slotted me, wouldn't you?" sard the old sergeant hoarsely.

"Sarge, I'm sorry. I..."

"No, you're a good lad." He still seemed able to read Fi's every thought, just as he had in training, "You only did what I taught you to do. What did I say?"

Fi swallowed. "Priority is to drop the bad guys. Sarge."

"Good. I'm proud of you. Sentimentality gets you killed." He tapped Fi's cheek a few times with the flat of his hand. "And matey over there is luckier than he'll ever know as are we all. They made him change clothes with them for a good reason, I reckon. He's CorSec."

The businessman. N'zaet Nir, was still standing by the wall, exammfng the scruffy tan jacket and pants as if appalled to find himself in such tatty clothing. He should have been medevacked for a routine check-up by now, but whatever he had said had ensured he was still there and waiting. He walked up to Obrim.

"I need to leave right now."

"You really should have that check-up. sir."

"But I have an important meeting. I'm a member of Co'Sec's Direx, and it's imperative that I attend,'

"Just as well you're in one piece then," said Skirata. 'I don't think your government colleagues would have found it amusing if we'd crashed in and shot you by mistake. Especially when the explosives were dummies."

Nir seemed to have forgotten his terror of a few minutes earlier. "No. they would not. We hope to stay out of your disputes with the Separatists. Can I have my suit back now?,And who's paying for the damage?"

Fi thought a thank you might have been a nice touch, but he realized he had missed something in the exchange that had made Ogrim and Skirata just stare at each other.

Niner walked over to them, followed by Ordo. Neither looked as if anything left them trembling. "What have I missed?"

"It wasn't the Senator," said Ogrim. "He wasn't the key hostage. He was a lure to get us to storm in and kill the real trump card they were holding."

"You want to explain all that, Sarge?"

Skirata raked stubby fingers through his hair. "The Corporate Sector Authority is neutral and the Direx Board is its governing body. They've got serious money and armaments, so you don't want to upset them. So if Fi had shot a Direx member, the political fall-out would have been enormous - CorSec might have decided to take sides and throw their money and guns behind the Separatists. Want me to go on?"

"Fierfek," said Fi. But it still didn't feel as close a call as nearly killing Skirata. "That's a new one for the training manual."

"You said it. Heavy-handed Republic overreacts, storms in and kills top CorSec man, Nice stunt, whoever they are."

Obrim shrugged. 'Well, you can sleep soundly tonight in the knowledge that you've given Rugeyan a timely public relations coup. Just a shame it wasn't live on RHN...

He trailed off. Ordo had taken off his helmet. For some reason, Fi wasn't expecting the ARC to look like them but of course he did. He looked Fi straight in the eye, but it wasn't like looking in a mirror at all, although it was a striking enough resemblance to reduce Obrim to silence.

"We're not supposed to be in the public eye." said Ordo. "But it doesn't do the Republic's citizens any harm to know what we do." He was staring intently at Fi. "And you, brother, are very mouthy, very annoying, and stupidly brave. I forgive you for the crack about the kama. This time, anyway. "

Fi didn't feel brave, not right then. He also wondered, if smothering the bomb had been any more courageous than Master Kaim's actions. It was pure training, a split-second's decision exactly like Darman's or Atin's - or Ordo's.

And it was another thing that Kal Skirata had taught him to do. He remembered that now.

Holonews Update, 1930: The siege at Galactic City spaceport has ended with the rescue of Senator Meena Tills and all the remaining hostages. Commando forces stormed a hall in the terminal building and shot dead four terrorists from a group opposed to Republic influence on Haruun Kal. We now have our droid cams back on line, and we're going live to the scene.

Rugeyan was as smug as Qbrim had predicted. He came back into the terminal hall trailed by journalists and a cloud of fresh hovercams oozing satisfaction. Obrim stopped them and took him aside, walking him to the knot of commandos and police that was waiting beside the shattered doors.

"Before you strike up the band, you ought to know the explosives were a hoax." said the commander.

Fi watched absolutely nothing cross Rugeyan's face.

"So?"

"Looks like a stunt to get us to go in mob-handed and shoot a member of the CorSec Direx Board, and that has nothing to do with the Senator. We can't be sure who's behind it. so let's think about this before we start crowing."

Rugeyan maintained his blank expression in silence for a few seconds. Then a practiced smile snapped instantly into place. "Commander, those thugs held innocent people and murdered a Jedi Master whose sole concern was the welfare of the hostages. The Senate does not tolerate terrorism. We deal with it robustly, and we have shown billions viewers tonight just what awaits anyone who wants to test our resolve." His smile disappeared like a light going out. "The rest is detail, and that needn't trouble our vigilant media."

He gathered up his smile again and walked back to where the media were waiting.

"Will he remember all that for the earns?" asked Fi.

"He probably talks like that in his sleep," said Ogrim. "Anyway, I just want to get home. Unless you boys would like a drink."

Skirata smiled uncomfortably. "We're always on duty, Commander, so we don't get to have a drink. But thanks. You go on home."

Fi couldn't find a joke that would help him right then. He was grateful for the privacy of his helmet,

I really would have fired.

Darman elbowed him in the back, more a playful gesture than one of annoyance. "We missed dinner." he said. "Maybe you can talk the cooks into fixing us something when we get back "

Ordo was listening to his private link, head down. It was a giveaway gesture with ARCs. Fi thought "CSF transport's here to take us back to barracks." he said, straightening up. 'You're shipping out on a new deployment at 0600 tomorrow. Omega.'

Skirata jerked his head round for a second, dismay unguarded, and then gave them a smile that didn't quite conceal his anxiety.

"You make sure you get them a decent meal first, Captain." He jabbed a finger in their direction, then appeared to yield to some private thought and gave them all a slap on the back. "No damaging government property, okay? And we'll have chat drink one day soon, I promise you."

He winked and pulled up his collar, limping into the crowds outside in the riot of neon and vehicle lights that was Galactic City, and changing before their eyes from time - served commando to anonymous old man as surely as any Gurlanin could shift shape.

"I've never had a proper alcoholic drink." said Atin. "Or a free bowl of warra nuts."

"Well, if they're free, that's worth staying alive for," said Fi, and they snapped their helmets back into place to become the Republic's ultimate, faceless deterrent once again.

Storm Fleet Warnings

Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker were returning from a mission, heading back to the Temple by way of the Llon Nebulae. As they approached the Kronex spaceport, they had to reduce speed to minimum levels. Anakin drummed his fingers on the pilot seat. There was nothing worse than piloting an ultra-tweaked starfighter and having to go slow.

Ahead, three stray asteroids bounced on a wave of atmospheric disturbance.

Anakin pushed the throttle. He had only seconds before the asteroids were suddenly in front of him, careening crazily. He cut to the left, avoiding the first one, then zoomed right, just missing the second. Then he flipped over for a screaming dive and made a hard right for open space, missing the last asteroid by a comfortable twenty meters.

Within seconds his Master had drawn his own starfighter level with Anakin's.

Obi-Wan had given the asteroids a wide berth-exactly what he was supposed to do.

The comm unit crackled with his Master's dry tone. "You could have gone around them."

"It was faster to go through them."

"Ah. And what do you know about the Llon Nebulae, my young apprentice?" Obi-Wan prodded.

"Smaller cruisers are advised to proceed at minimum velocity. Atmospheric waves can appear without warning," Anakin said dutifully.

"And yet you decided to play 'chase the asteroid,'" Obi-Wan said sternly. "You're too old for these childish games." Anakin pressed his lips together. He couldn't explain to his Master that for him, testing his skills wasn't a childish game. It was a necessary release.

There was a wall between them now. He had done things he could not tell Obi-Wan. He knew things he could not say. The Clone Wars had ripped the galaxy apart. Times were difficult for all the Jedi, but Anakin knew he felt the darkness more than most. It was like a physical presence. It was as though he carried the weight of it in his body.

And so he pushed the darkness away with what had always helped him forget in the past. Speed. Physical training. His Jedi path.

Anakin glanced at his instruments and was suddenly alert. Ships were approaching from the rear. The skirmishes of the Clone Wars had reached every corner of the galaxy. It was always wise to check out your neighbors.

"Looks like large transports behind us," Anakin said.

"Unusual for such a large fleet to be traveling in such close formation," Obi-Wan observed.

Anakin flipped over in a fast roll, and Obi-Wan followed. They split up and paced the three asteroids, keeping them between their starships and the fleet.

Anakin watched the first line of ships approach. They were huge, sheathed in dull black durasteel and advanced weaponry. That wasn't unusual these days.

Even bulk freighters had to arm themselves now.

But these transports were too well designed to be bulk freighters, Anakin realized.

It wasn't obvious unless you studied the lines of the ship and the quality of the fittings.

"They look like they could be from the Kuat Drive Yards," Anakin said. "The proportions and the lines of the design..."

"Look at the plating on the underside," Obi-Wan said. "Something is odd about it." Anakin followed the lines of the plating. His Master was right. Something was off. It took him several seconds to figure it out.

The Kuat Drive Yards...

"It must be the Storm Fleet," Anakin said.

The Jedi had recently learned that the Separatists had secretly put in an order for a heavily armored fleet of attack ships. Disguised as freighters so that they could travel secretly through the galaxy, they were actually outfitted with so much firepower that smaller planets were completely defenseless against them.

The Jedi hung back while the transports landed at the spaceport. Then they commed for clearance and docked at a landing bay close by.

"We'll never get in to investigate without a battle," Obi-Wan said, surveying the area quickly. "I've been to this spaceport with Qui-Gon, long ago. He has a friend who works here. A mechanic. He ended up here after a brilliant career on the Senate elite security team. He'll be able to help us."

"Should we head to the mechanic shop, then?" Anakin asked.

A small smile flickered on Obi-Wan's face as he shook his head. "The cantina." Kronex was so large that it had a variety of cantinas. Obi-Wan chose the darkest and noisiest. A large holosign outside with missing letters proclaimed: CHEC WEAP NS AT DO R, but Anakin could see with one glance at the holstered blasters and vibroshivs tucked in belts that the directive was ignored by the clientele.

In a corner a tall being sat, an ale in front of him on the table. He wore a grimy scarf around his head, and his ten-fingered hands were permanently stained with grease. Large pouches underneath his hooded eyes gave him a sad air. He was so still he appeared to be almost asleep.

"That's your contact?" Anakin asked dubiously.

Obi-Wan and Anakin sat down at his table. "Can I buy you another?" Obi-Wan asked, indicating his mug of ale.

"Thank you, stranger, but two is my limit," the being said. His tone was friendly, but his sleepy eyes examined the two Jedi suspiciously.

"I don't remember you ever having limits, Fizz," Obi-Wan said.

Shaggy gray eyebrows rose. The movement seemed to cost the being a great deal of effort. "Everything changes. Everything goes. Including my memory. Do I know you?"

"We've met," Obi-Wan said. "Perhaps you remember my Master, Qui-Gon Jinn." The being blinked twice, which for him was a substantial reaction. "Qui-Gon Jinn," he said slowly. "The best of the best." He heaved a sigh. "Gone now, like the best of them are. You must be Obi-Wan. You've grown up, I see. And you need a favor, no doubt."

"A large fleet just landed in docking bays 1211 through 1222," Obi-Wan said.

"We'd like to know where they're going. And we don't want it known the Jedi are asking questions."

"I like that kind of favor. I don't even need to move." He took a small datapad from his pocket, checked it, and frowned. "No data. That means they

have special clearance. But if you can't go in the front door, try the back." He pushed away his glass and stood. "Come with me." Fizz used his security card to get them into the service area. There, massive tanks pumped fuel to the receiving stations. With a wave at a fellow mechanic, Fizz used his card to access the control board. Quickly he punched in several numbers.

"That should do it." Fizz ambled toward the door that opened onto the hangar.

"The fuel gauge will tell them something's wrong, and they'll call a mechanic." The Jedi watched as Fizz grabbed a hydrosponder and approached the guard standing by the ramp. Fizz waved his arms. The guard checked a datapad at his waist belt. Fizz pointed to the ship, but the guard shook his head.

"He won't let him board," Anakin said. "Let's go."

"Wait," Obi-Wan ordered.

The guard reached for a comlink. Fizz began to argue and, in a gesture so graceful it almost looked tender, reached out and tapped the guard behind the ear with the hydrosponder. The guard slumped to the floor.

Fizz didn't hesitate. With a surprising display of speed and strength, he leaped over the guard and raced up the ramp. They counted off the seconds, and Fizz reappeared. He streaked down the ramp, leaped over the guard again, accessed the service door, and grinned at them.

"The fleet is headed for the Cyphar system," Fizz said. "But I don't know why."

"I do," Obi-Wan said grimly.

"So why are the Jedi so interested in bulk freighters?" Fizz asked. Then he held up a hand. "Don't tell me."

"Perhaps one day we will need your help again," Obi-Wan said.

"No offense, young Obi-Wan," Fizz said. "But I hope you do not ask. I intend to wait out the Clone Wars in the cantina." They left Fizz at the entrance to the cantina and headed back to their starfighters.

"What is Cyphar, Master?" Anakin asked.

"A small but strategically located planet in the Mid-Rim," Obi-Wan answered.

"A coalition of Separatists is there right now, negotiating to establish a base. At least the Separatists are calling it negotiation. Threats are more like it."

"So the fleet will orbit Cyphar during the talks in order to intimidate them," Anakin said. "Cyphar will fear an invasion if they don't comply."

"I'm afraid that looks like the plan," Obi-Wan said.

"We must follow the Storm Fleet," Anakin declared.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "And do what?"

"We can't just let them go!"

"We will notify the Temple of what we have learned," Obi-Wan said. "They'll alert the Republic and try to send ships."

"You know we are stretched thin," Anakin said. "Most likely there won't be ships to send. And we are here, now."

"This is one small battle in a very large war, Anakin," Obi-Wan said. "The Council needs us for other things." Anakin set his jaw stubbornly. "And that is all right with you?"

"No," Obi-Wan said. "But I can't see another way at the moment."

A roar filled the air. "They're taking off!" Anakin cried, then raced to his starfighter's docking bay and leaped into the cockpit. He saw Obi-Wan dashing to his own starfighter. Anakin took off and was followed by Obi-Wan into the stratosphere.

Obi-Wan's voice came over the comm unit. "I hope you have a plan."

"Just contact the Temple," Anakin said. "I'll do the rest." Within minutes, the Storm Fleet was in sight. Anakin zigzagged in and out of the formation. He was so close he could count the rivets on the front panels.

"Identify yourself," a voice came over the comm.

Anakin did a quick roll, then zoomed under the belly of a ship to come up next to another. He flew between the two massive ships, darting in and out.

Suddenly, the fleet changed direction slightly. That was a good sign. He was getting to them. Anakin dropped back and slowed his speed.

Three of the ships peeled off from the formation. They executed a surprisingly sharp turn, considering their size. Anakin took a moment to admire their maneuverability before he noticed that the armor plating was rolling back.

"Anything to say now?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Oops?" Anakin said.

The first fire from the laser cannons hit empty space as Anakin and Obi-Wan simultaneously went into a steep dive. The ships followed. The shock waves of the weapons fire caused his starfighter to dance.

Anakin turned sharply to the left. Obi-Wan turned to the right. The laser cannons blasted again, missing them by a few meters.

"Proton torpedoes coming up," Obi-Wan said tersely.

The torpedoes locked onto the starfighters. Anakin pushed the ship into a steep dive, then veered left. The torpedoes missed him by two meters. Close.

"More torpedoes on the left! Anakin, watch out!" Anakin kept the starfighter in the same arc but pushed the nose down. He could feel the controls shudder. He was really pushing the engines now.

The blast almost threw him to the floor. Anakin grabbed the controls. He checked his warning lights. All clear... then a red light began to blink.

"I've been hit. They got my stabilizer," he told Obi-Wan. They both knew what that meant. Without a horizontal stabilizer, he wouldn't be able to maneuver. A series of chirps came through comm as his astromech droid tried to fix the problem.

Anakin pulled up. Laser cannon fire thundered past his flank. Obi-Wan darted ahead of him, trying to draw the fire, giving the droid time to finish. Anakin called on the Force, reaching out for it to make his decisions fluid.

"Anakin, you're pushing it," Obi-Wan shouted. "I can see your stabilizers shaking." His droid beeped. The warning lights blinked off, and Anakin felt the ship's movement smooth underneath his hands.

"We've got to get out of here," Obi-Wan said. "We can't outrun them. And firing at them would be like pelting them with pebbles." Anakin studied his nav screen. "There's an asteroid storm up ahead, coming up fast. I say we fly right into it. With any luck it will be too late for them to avoid it." If Anakin had longed for a chance to put his starfighter through its paces, he'd found it. Asteroids careened crazily around him. Engines screaming, he shaved off centimeters from close encounters, pushing the ship to its limit. He could not use his instruments. He could only use the Force. Sweat beaded up on his forehead.

It was too late for the Storm Fleet to turn. They blundered into the storm.

Asteroids bounced off the surfaces of the ships harmlessly. But even a capital ship wouldn't be able to survive an impact with a large asteroid. Anakin saw the first ship begin to turn to retreat.

He changed direction and came directly at the disguised freighter, firing his laser cannons. The ship stopped its slow turn and reversed, firing at Anakin.

Anakin dived, heading straight for the massive asteroid ahead of him. The Force hummed around him as he swerved at the last possible second.

The enemy ship behind him hit the asteroid head-on.

Chunks of debris flew his way. More obstacles. He could see Obi-Wan spinning away, diving away from the wreckage. Anakin was too far to make the same maneuver. He pushed his nose up and climbed. He felt debris knock the ship, but with a quick glance at the instruments he saw that it hadn't been damaged.

Another explosion sent shock waves against the starfighter. The second freighter had been caught by the debris. Smoking and flaming, it spiraled down out of sight.

Anakin saw clear space ahead. With a last surge of speed, he avoided the last asteroid and sailed into the open atmosphere.

A moment later, he saw Obi-Wan over to his left.

"Wouldn't want to do that again," Obi-Wan said.

"At least we knocked out two of the freighters," Anakin said. "That will slow them down in time for the Republic Fleet to get to Cyphar."

"We were lucky." This time Anakin didn't argue. "Yes."

"Let's set our course for the Temple," Obi-Wan said. "And hope for a dull trip." Their starfighters moved gracefully toward their waiting hyperspace rings.

Had it been luck? he wondered. Or the Force?

Obi-Wan was so good at so many things. He could inspire loyalty. Shift strategies in a heartbeat. Fight harder than any Jedi Anakin had seen.

Yet did he trust the Force enough? If they were truly able to use the Force at its maximum potential, opposition would be nothing. They could destroy enemies.

They could claim the galaxy for peace.

"You can't do everything, Anakin," Obi-Wan said suddenly, as if he was reading his apprentice's mind. "You must choose the battles to fight." Anakin wanted to fight them all. He wanted to do everything. And he knew he could.

Duel

The battle for this part of the city was over. The Republic's forces had lost.

They had lost very badly.

Commander Brolis woke suddenly from his uneasy sleep as the proximity alarm buzzed, his hands fumbling for his DC-15 blaster rifle. Wincing at the pain in his side, he raised his head from his chest and peered out through one of the gaping holes in the wall of the ruined building he'd taken refuge in.

The day had given way to early evening while he dozed. But with the remaining daylight, the glow of the fires blazing elsewhere in the city, and the weapons flashes from the battles still raging in the distance, there was more than enough light to see the squad of battle droids making their way across the remains of the town square toward him.

With a grunt of pain, Brolis forced himself to his feet. On one level, it seemed complete waste of time, both for the droids to keep attacking and for him to keep fighting them off. His entire force was dead now, the last two squads whittled away as they waited here in this ruined building for the reinforcements that had never arrived. It was just a matter of time, he knew, before they got him, too.

Except that they didn't want him dead. They wanted him alive; and they wanted him badly enough to keep sending in battle droids, hoping to catch him napping.

Not this time, though. As long as he had a charged blaster and the ability to pull trigger, he would continue to litter the ground with scorched droid parts.

A slight movement across the square behind the battle droids caught his eye, and Brolis grimaced. Eventually, of course, they would get tired of wasting droids and decide to end the game once and for all. And when they did, they had the ultimate game-ender waiting in the shadows: a hailfire droid, towering over the rubble on its two massive hoop wheels, its twin missile launcher pods pointing idly in his direction.

This particular droid had been fitted with the lower-strength anti-personnel missiles, he knew, so that it could take out the troopers without bringing the whole city down on top of it. Just the same, a single one of those missiles through the wall, and it would be all over.

But until then, Brolis had work to do. Hoisting the blaster rifle to his shoulder, he centered his sights on the first battle droid.

"Your weapon, put away." Brolis spun around, nearly losing his balance in his haste. The gruff voice had come from behind him, where there was nothing but rubble from the row of buildings that had been destroyed in the earlier fighting. This had to be some kind of trick.

If it was, it was a very good one. The creature standing there was short, with green skin, large eyes, and even larger ears. Leaning on a gnarled walking stick, he was dressed in the kind of simple robe worn by lower-class beings all across the Republic.

And somehow, he seemed familiar.

"Commander Brolis, you are?" the creature asked.

"Yes," Brolis said, frowning. "Who are you?"

"The reinforcements you requested, I am," the creature said dryly. "Tell me: into the Fortress of Axion, you have penetrated?" Brolis grimaced. This was his reinforcements? "Briefly," he confirmed. "That's why the Separatists out there want me alive. They want to find out how we got in so they can plug that hole in their defenses."

"Indeed." The creature smiled, his long ears flattening as he did so. "For that same reason do we also wish you alive. That is why I am here." He lifted his stick and pointed to the opening. "Aside, stand you. Deal with the droids, I

will." Without waiting for permission, he hobbled forward. Brolis watched, his brain too frozen with bewilderment and the pain of his injuries to try to stop him. The creature paused just outside the gap, letting his stick drop to the ground and reaching a three-fingered hand in front of him. There was a flicker of motion, and a small cylinder seemed to jump into it from beneath his robe.

And with a snap-hiss, a brilliant green blade blazed into existence.

Brolis caught his breath as the memory finally clicked. Kamino-the embarkation of the Republic's clone army-a small creature distantly seen across the ordered ranks as he led the troops into the transports.

Reinforcements, indeed. This was Jedi Master Yoda himself.

Perhaps the approaching battle droids recognized him, too, or perhaps it was the sight of the lightsaber that turned their stealthy approach into a sudden full-fledged attack. But if they were hoping to overwhelm him with numbers, their strategy was a failure. Yoda never moved from the spot where he had planted himself, his swirling lightsaber blade deflecting away every one of the storm of blaster bolts coming toward him. Some of the shots ricocheted across the square to impact the ruins on the far side, but most reflected straight back to the droids themselves, shattering them into scrap metal.

Half a minute later, it was over. Brolis blinked in amazement, wondering if it was always that easy for Jedi.

And then, across the square, the hailfire droid stirred and began to roll forward.

"Look out!" Brolis called. "There's a-" The rest of his warning dissolved into a fit of painful coughing. But Yoda was already angling across the square away from him, lightsaber held ready as he slipped from one pile of debris to another. The hailfire shifted direction toward the small Jedi Master, swiveling to keep its missile launchers trained on him.

And then, midway between two stacks of rubble, Yoda stopped, facing the droid as if challenging it to a private duel. The droid stopped, too, and for a moment they seemed to be regarding each other. Then, almost delicately, the droid lowered its pods and sent a single missile sizzling through the air.

Brolis tensed, watching helplessly as the rocket streaked across the open space.

Jedi lightsabers, he knew, could defend quite well against the bolts from blasters or plasma weapons. But trying to block a missile that way would merely cause it to explode. If Yoda didn't do something fast, he was going to die.

Then, just as it seemed there was no chance left, Yoda leaped almost casually to the side. The rocket burned through the space he'd just vacated, exploding harmlessly a dozen meters behind him.

From somewhere deep inside the hailfire droid came an annoyed-sounding rumble, the first time Brolis had ever heard one make a noise like that. For a second or two it seemed to be pondering its next move. Then, in rapid succession, three more missiles burst outward, angling into a tight spread as they flew.

Yoda was ready. He leaped back toward his earlier position to let the first pass by, dropped flat onto the ground as the second shot over his head, then rolled and bounded upward in time to avoid the third. He landed on the ground, lifted his lightsaber again to ready position, and waited. Brolis strained his ears, listening for a clue as to what the droid would do.

And then, over the distance, he heard a series of calibration clicks. "Tracking lock!" he shouted toward Yoda.

His lungs heaved with a fresh coughing fit, and he could only hope the other had caught his warning. By activating the tracking system, the droid was setting its missiles to follow their target no matter what. Yoda's only hope now was to find cover before the missiles got a clean lock onto him.

But he remained where he was, waiting. Lowering its launchers again, the droid fired.

Again, Yoda leaped upward as the missile approached. But this time something was different. Instead of simply arcing into the air, he twisted his body into a dizzying set of spins, twisting back and forth like a gymnast performing a complicated aerial routine.

The effect on the missile was startling. It seemed to tremble as it flew, its nose shaking back and forth as if thoroughly confused. It shot past Yoda, still shaking, and continued on to explode across the square.

Brolis grinned tightly. It was the same sort of evasive jinking maneuver he'd seen starfighter pilots perform in order to shake off a target-locked missile. He'd never guessed that any being, even a Jedi Master, could duplicate such a technique on his own.

Neither, apparently, had the droid. Another growl rumbled across the square; and then, suddenly, it was rolling forward, filling the air with a fresh stream of missiles as it charged.

Yoda was already in motion, leaping and spinning, hitting the ground and bounding off again at unexpected angles, making himself an impossible target for even a hailfire's weaponry to tag. Brolis found himself wincing as missile after missile slipped harmlessly past the Jedi Master, shaking the ground and lighting up the square with distant detonations. One of the missiles, which looked like it couldn't possibly miss, somehow bent aside from its path just far enough to collide with another of the salvo, detonating both midway between Yoda and the droid.

And as that premature explosion momentarily blocked the droid's view, Yoda abruptly switched from defense to attack. He hurled his lightsaber toward the machine, the weapon spinning into the obscuring cloud of smoke from the missiles' collision and shooting out the other side.

But the intended target was no longer there. Even as the missiles had collided, the droid had skidded to a halt and reversed direction to roll rapidly backward across the square. The lightsaber blade sliced through the space where it had been; and as the weapon hesitated in midair, the droid fired another missile straight at it. At the last second, the lightsaber dodged out of its way, streaking back to safety in Yoda's hand. The missile itself shot harmlessly past to add yet another crater to the distant landscape.

With that the barrage ceased. For a few seconds Yoda and the droid again seemed to be staring at each other. Then, moving swiftly but warily, Yoda retraced his steps back to the broken building. "It just let you walk away?" Brolis asked, not quite believing it.

"Clever, this hailfire droid is," Yoda huffed as he stepped in through the opening and retrieved his walking stick. "Close enough to engage it in direct battle, it will not allow me. Nor in futile attacks will it expend all of its missiles. That is why it has stopped now, the situation further to assess."

"So what do we do?" Brolis asked.

Yoda's ears flattened. "Allow it to destroy itself, we must," he said, closing down his lightsaber and gesturing behind Brolis. "Come." Brolis hadn't been to the rear of the ruined building for three days, not since he'd confirmed that there was no escape route there for him and his squad. He walked now past the scattered bodies of his troops, fighting against the pain of his injuries, wondering what exactly the Jedi Master had in mind.

He soon found out. Where once had been merely stacks of collapsed wall and ceiling material, there was now a small, Yoda-sized tunnel stretching back through the rubble. So that was how the other had appeared so unexpectedly behind him. "A series of large caverns there are, in the cliffs behind this part of the city," Yoda said. "Beyond them, my transport is."

"Yes, I know about the caverns," Brolis said, frowning. The Jedi had stopped beside the entrance to the tunnel and was looking back at him. "I'm not sure I'm up to crawling that far," Brolis warned him, eyeing the tunnel. "My side-" He broke off as, suddenly, he found himself rising gently off the floor, turning over in midair, and floating head-first toward the tunnel. "But the caverns have no other exit," he added, determined not to show surprise or panic in front of this creature half his size, "so we decided they were of no strategic use to us." He frowned as he was deftly threaded into the narrow tunnel. "Or is there a way out that I don't know about?"

"There is no way out," Yoda confirmed as they moved together down the tunnel.

"Through the side of the collapsed building, I came. But the droid will not know that." The tunnel was suddenly rocked by a terrific explosion from behind them. The piles of debris they were traveling through shook violently, the pressure wave sending a fresh surge of pain through Brolis's injuries. "What was that?" he gasped.

"The hailfire droid, it is," Yoda said, his voice sounding faint and distant through the pounding of the blood in Brolis's ears. "No longer, I fear, does it wish to take you alive. Now, I believe, it will be coming to kill." Another blast shook the tunnel. This time, as the shock wave washed over him, Brolis fell again into darkness.

He awoke to find himself lying beside a boulder, staring upward at a distant and dimly lit ceiling of rock. Rolling over carefully, he got up onto his knees and eased his eyes above the boulder.

He was in a vast, dome-shaped cavern, one of the group Yoda had mentioned just before the hailfire droid had attacked. Scattered around the floor were a handful of glowsticks, enough to show the Jedi Master standing by the cavern's side. He was slicing into the wall with his lightsaber beneath a wide band of rock that stretched up along the curved wall to the ceiling and down the other side, forming a sort of rough arch in the center of the cavern.

Brolis frowned up at the formation. He didn't remember any arch being there when he'd explored these caverns two weeks ago. Could his eyes be playing tricks on him?

He stiffened. Above the lightsaber's hum he could hear another sound: the creaking wheels of an approaching hailfire droid.

Which meant Yoda's plan had failed. Obviously, he'd hoped the droid would try to follow them and get itself stuck in the collapsed buildings long enough for him to cut an exit through the cavern wall. But with persistence and probably a few carefully placed missiles, the droid had managed to batter its way through the rubble, enlarge the entrance to the caverns, and chase them down.

It was approaching now. And they were trapped.

Yoda heard the sound, too. Closing down his lightsaber, he leaped across the cavern to land beside Brolis's boulder. "Ah-awake, you are," the Jedi said. "Good.

Be silent, now, and observe." Across the cavern, the hailfire rolled into view. Its cyclopean photoreceptor eye spotted Yoda at once, and it swiveled to face him. Missile pods aimed and ready, it continued forward.

It had reached the center of the cavern when, from beside the two ends of the stone arch, a pair of clone troopers suddenly rose from concealment behind boulders and opened fire.

Brolis's mouth dropped open in disbelief as the blaster fire raked across the droid. But his troops had all been killed in the fighting. Where in the world had Yoda found these men?

The droid responded instantly to the sudden new threat. Swiveling hard to its right, it fired a missile at the clone trooper there, then rotated to face the opposite direction and launched another at the second trooper. The missiles hit their targets dead-center and exploded.

With a horrendous double crack, the bottom sections of the arch blew apart.

Shock waves raced upward along the walls, shattering the arch into twin waterfalls of falling stone. The waves reached the top of the dome, and with a roar the rest of the arch and the entire center of the ceiling collapsed.

Burying the hailfire droid beneath a massive pile of rock.

And Brolis finally understood. There had been no soldiers, merely empty sets of armor animated by the same mysterious power that had earlier carried him through the tunnel. Yoda hadn't been trying to cut an exit with his lightsaber, but had instead been putting the finishing touches on a booby-trap of loosened rock that he knew would collapse under the droid's attack.

Just as he had promised, he had allowed the hailfire to destroy itself.

"Come, Commander," the Jedi Master said quietly. "Await us, my transport does."

Equipment

A Personal Account of the Sub-orbital Action at Haruun Kal, as reported by Auxiliary Heavy-Weapons Specialist CT-6/774.

We popped out of hyperspace above the plane of the ecliptic. Al'har's light was brilliant yellow. Haruun Kal was a bright blue-green crescent.

Two asteroid belts sparkled yellow among the black-and-white starfield: one beyond Haruun Kal's orbit, vast and old, spreading toward the gas giants that swung through the outer system, and a smaller, younger belt in orbit around the planet itself: remnants of what once had been the planet's moon.

I snugged my helmet and checked my armor's life-support parameters, then dogged the transparisteel hatch of the bubble turret.

My helmet's speakers crackled softly. "Comm check," Lieutenant Four-One said.

The Lieutenant's our pilot. The 2nd Lou, cl-33/890, handles nav. He checked in with a "Nav is go." I reported my turret as go, and my port-side partner, ct-014/783, did the same from his.

The Halleck swung down out of interstellar space and inserted into planetary orbit almost halfway out to the moon-belt, more than ten thousand clicks from the surface. Intel had reported a rumor that Haruun Kal might have a small number of planetary-defense ion cannons, and a medium cruiser is a very large target.

Just before we lit engines and lifted out of the Halleck's ship bay, I clicked my comm over to the dedicated turret-freq. "Take care of the equipment, Eight-Three." My partner answered the way he always does: "And the equipment will take care of us, Seven-Four."

That's how we wish each other luck.

The mag-screen de-powered. The ship bay's atmosphere gusted out toward the star in a billow of glittering ice crystals.

Blue-white pinpoints fanned out before us: ion drives of our starfighter escort.

The transparisteel of my bubble-turret hummed with sympathetic resonance as one of the Jadthu-class landers undocked and followed them, then it was our turn.

Our flight leader took point. We sucked ions on left wing. Five gunships left the Halleck.

None would come back.

Take care of your equipment, and your equipment will take care of you.

That's one of the first things they teach us in the creche-schools on Kamino.

Even before we're awake. By the time we are brought to consciousness for skillsdevelopment, the knowledge pumps have drilled "Take care of your equipment" so deeply into our minds that it's more than instinct. It's practically natural law.

We live or die by our equipment.

I am a clone trooper in the Grand Army of the Republic.

My designation is ct-6/774. I serve on a Republic close-assault gunship. I am the starboard bubble-turret gunner.

I love my job. We all do; we're created for it.

But my job is special. Because my partner-ct-014/783, the port bubble-turret gunner-and I are the ones who take care of the equipment.

Our weapons platform, the RHE LAAT/i, is an infantry-support weapon. We soften up and harass the enemy; our targets are bunkers, armored vehicles, mobile artillery, and enemy footsoldiers. When our infantry brothers need to get to the enemy, we're the ones who blast down the door.

The LAAT/i is designed for dropping troops into a hot fire-zone. We're not fast, but we can go anywhere. Our assault weapons are controlled through nav; the navigator runs all three antipersonnel turrets, the main missile launcher and two of the four main cannons. Our laser cannons can punch holes through medium armor, and the missile launchers take care of the heavy stuff; they're mass-driver launchers, so our loads can be customized for the mission. We carry he (high explosive), heap (high explosive armor-piercing) and apf (anti-personnel fragmentation) missiles; we stay away from baradium weapons-too unstable-but detonite and proton-core warheads can handle everything we're likely to come up against.

Our job-me and Eight-Three, the bubble-turret gunners-is to handle everything that comes up against us. Each turret is a sphere of transparisteel that tracks along with our cannons; my partner and I also each control a launcher loaded with four short-range air-to-air rockets. If anything comes at us, we shoot it down.

That's what I mean about taking care of the equipment.

Let's say we're cracking a hardened bunker on a desert planet. We come in low over the dunes, pumping missiles and cannonfire against the target emplacement.

Let's say you're operating an anti-aircraft cannon half a klick away, and you open fire on us. The pilot and the navigator don't even have to look up. Because I'm there.

Go ahead and take your shot. You won't get two.

Fire a missile at us. I'll blast it to scrap. Launch a proton grenade. I'll blow your head off. Make an attack run riding a speeder bike. But make out your will, first.

Because if you attack us, I will take you out.

That's what I do.

I love my job, and I am very, very good at it.

I have to be: because sometimes my gunship has to do things it's not designed for. That's how it goes when you're fighting a war.

Like at Haruun Kal.

We were assigned to the Republic medium cruiser Halleck, on station in the Ventran system. A regiment of heavy infantry, twenty Jadthu-class landers, an escort of six starfighters.

And us: five rhe LAAT/i-s.

We weren't supposed to know why we were there, naturally; just as naturally, we knew anyway. It was clear this would be a VIP extraction on a hostile planet.

It wasn't hard to figure. Those Jadthu-class landers are basically just flying bunkers. They go in fast, land, then stand there and take a pounding until it's time to take off again. Nothing but armor, engines, two heavy laser turrets and an Arakyd Caltrop-5 chaff gun. They're plenty fast in a straight line, but they are the opposite of nimble. There is no evasive action in a Jadthu.

The Halleck had twenty of them: that meant the landing-zone would be hot.

Maybe very hot. Maybe nova-class. The starfighters were for orbital cover. Suborbital and atmospheric cover was our job.

Ventran is on the Gevarno Loop, one of half a dozen systems linked by hyperspace lanes that run through Al'har. Haruun Kal is the only habitable planet in the Al'har system.

Haruun Kal is Separatist.

General Windu-that's Jedi Master Mace Windu, General of the Grand Army of the Republic and Senior Member of the Jedi Council-had gone dirtside on Haruun Kal, alone and undercover, tracking a rogue Jedi. Why had a General gone in personally? We didn't know. Why had he gone in alone? We didn't ask.

We didn't care.

It wasn't our business.

This is what we knew: If nothing went wrong, we wouldn't have anything to do.

We'd cruise our station in the Ventran system for a week or two, then jump back for reassignment.

Something went wrong.

Our business was to get General Windu out again.

The moon-belt was where they were hiding. Waiting for us.

The whole system was a trap.

They must have been there for weeks, powered down, clamped to drifting asteroids.

Undetectable. Waiting for a Republic ship to enter orbit.

Which the Halleck had just done.

Against the glittering weave of the belt, they were close enough to invisible that I couldn't pick them out until Lt. Nine-Oh muttered from nav: "Hostiles incoming.

On intercept. But not for us, sir! They're after the Halleck!" Lt. One-Four: "How many, nav?"

"Calculating. No. Sorry, sir. No hard numbers available. Sensors keep picking up more."

"How many so far? What are we looking at?"

"Acceleration and drive output profiles indicate starfighters. Droid starfighters, sir." Automated weapons systems directed by sophisticated droid brains.

"Probably Geonosian. So far, I'm reading sixty-four."

"Sixty-four!"

"Strike that. Ninety-one. One-oh-five. One-twenty-eight, sir." One hundred and twenty-eight droid starfighters streaked toward us: a vast array of crescent sparks haloed by blue-white ion scatter. Faster, more maneuverable, and more heavily armed than anything in our little twelve-ship flotilla-and the droid brains piloting those starfighters have reflexes that operate at the speed of light.

And the Halleck was directly in their path.

"Hear that, turrets? This will be hot space. Repeat: we are entering hot space."

"Starboard reads, sir," I told him as I charged my cannon. "And I am go."

"Port reads, sir. Go."

"Signal from the Halleck, sir!" Nine-Oh said. "Recall: All ships abort. The Halleck is under attack-she's all alone back there, sir!"

"Not for long." Lt. Four-One spun our ship through a spiral that whipped us around and aimed us back toward the Halleck. The cruiser was a star-specked wedge of shadow transiting the grid of droid starfighter drive-streams. Now turbolasers started blasting out from that shadow toward the grid; from here the huge particle beams looked like hairlines of blue light. I worked my pedals and swung the fire-control yoke so that the turret's servo-boom angled my weapon to bear on the grid-formation of starfighters.

I knew Eight-Three was doing exactly the same.

"Fire at will, turrets." They were still far beyond the effective range of my cannon. I squeezed the yoke anyway. Even through my armored gloves, the hum of the yoke buzzed up my arms as four arcs of electric blue energy joined in front of the cannon's oval reflector-shield, then flashed away through the vacuum. I held the triggers down. Concentrating on evading the Halleck's turbolasers, a droid starfighter might just blunder into one of my shots by accident. You never know.

The grid formation began to break up as the droids took evasive action. Our own starfighters-all six of them-flashed past us in pairs that swung and scissored and looped into battle.

We made for the Halleck as fast as our external drives could push us. Our gunship was never intended to dogfight against starfighters. That didn't stop us. It didn't slow us down. But we never got there.

They came out of nowhere.

The first I knew of the new ambushers was when our ship shuddered under multiple cannon-blasts. A droid starfighter flashed past not thirty meters from my turret. I twisted my yoke and the turret spun and my bolt caught one of the starfighter's aft control-surfaces. It broke up as it spun, but I didn't have time to enjoy the view because they were all over us.

Must have been at least half a wing: thirty-two ships. They were everywhere.

Four-one had our gunship spinning and whirling and dodging side to side: from the turret it looked like the whole galaxy was yanking itself in random directions around me. All I could do was hold on to my fire-control yoke and try not to hit friendly ships. My cannon sprayed green fire and I scored on at least five hits-two of them kills-but there were always more incoming.

I saw the lander crack open and then explode: huge chunks of its armor spun out like ship-sized shrapnel to crush two of the starfighters that had blasted it. I saw another LAAT/i drifting through a slow barrel-roll, its engines dark, sparks spitting out through the twisted blast-gap where its cockpit used to be. One of its bubble-turrets was shattered; in the other, a trooper struggled with the turret's access hatch. I never got a chance to see if that gunner made it out; another flight of enemy fighters swarmed around us, and I was too busy shooting to watch.

Then I felt a shock that bounced my turret. The spin of the galaxy changed, and I knew I was in trouble.

That last shock had been a cannon-blast hitting my turret's servo-boom. It had blown my turret right off the ship. Now it wasn't even really a turret anymore. It was just a bubble.

Spinning lazily, I drifted through the battle.

I didn't have any illusions about surviving. Turret-gunners don't wear repulsorpacks; no room in there. My emergency repulsorpack was back in the troop bay of my gunship. If my gunship even existed anymore.

From inside my slowly spinning bubble, I saw the rest of the battle. I saw the Halleck absorb blast after blast, until a pair of droid starfighters streaked in and rammed the bridge. I saw the other nineteen landers undock from the cruiser and lumber through the swarm of hostiles. I saw the cruiser streak away into hyperspace.

I saw landers peeled like meatfruit, spilling troopers into orbit. These were the heavy infantry and the rp troopers-the repulsorpack men. They knew they were going to die. So each and every one of them decided to die fighting. How do I know that?

They are my brothers. And that's what I would do.

The heavy infantry opened up on the droid starfighters with their handweapons and small arms; some of them scattered miniature minefields of magnetized proton grenades. Others had shoulder-fired light missile launchers. Some of the rp troopers had nothing but their dc-15 blaster carbines, which couldn't put much of a dent in a starfighter, so they used their repulsorpacks to deliberately move themselves into the paths of streaking enemy ships. At orbital combat speeds of thousands of kilometers per hour, a starfighter that strikes a combatarmored trooper might as well be flying straight into the side of an asteroid.

The landers did what they could to help us out; those chaff guns they carry shoot out huge clouds of durasteel fragments, intended to confuse enemy sensors and interfere with enemy cannonfire. Those fragments don't have the velocity to penetrate the armor of drifting troopers, but any enemy ship whipping through a cloud of them at a couple thousand kph just comes apart.

But the landers hadn't come out there to fight for us; General Windu had ordered the whole regiment down to the surface. I imagine you've already heard about the Battle of Lorshan Pass, and the firestorm in Pelek Baw, and everything else that happened planetside.

I wasn't in any of that.

Though I did fire the last shot in the orbital battle.

Most of the landers broke through, and pretty much all the droid starfighters followed them in. After that, things got pretty peaceful there in orbit.

Most of us were dead.

RP troopers flew from one drifting body to the next, gathering those who'd survived and salvaging life-support packs from the armor of the corpses. A couple of the rp troopers stopped by my bubble; they managed to halt my spin, but there wasn't much else they could do for me, and we all knew it.

I was headed down into the atmosphere.

That was when we saw the last of the starfighters, heading right toward us. It was pursuing what was, to me, the single most beautiful thing I should ever hope to see: battered, shot full of holes, one wing gone, limping along on a single engine at half-power, one bubble turret missing, the other smashed: an LAAT/i.

My LAAT/i.

Missiles exhausted, it was trying to hold off the droid starfighter with pinpoint fire from its antipersonnel turrets, without much luck.

But I had a surprise. Bubble turrets pack powercells to maintain weapon-charge for short periods if all enginepower is shunted to maneuvering.

I still had a couple of shots left.

The RP troopers who had stabilized me rotated my turret and steadied it for the shot, and I led the enemy ship and squeezed the fire-control yoke - And it flew right into my shot.

I enjoyed the explosion.

Between the RP troopers and my ship, we collected every single one of the drifting survivors. The gunship was in no shape for atmospheric flight, so we limped out to the moon-belt and docked on to an asteroid. The lieutenants put me in for a commendation.

Salvaged life-support packs kept us all breathing for two standard days- which was when the Republic task force arrived.

The first thing they did was pick up survivors.

Because we are equipment, too.

As long as the Republic takes care of us, we'll take care of it.

A

dmiral Jerjerrod's Testimony

(From the days of the Old Republic, a holorecording of Senate Security Hearings, Naval Subcommittee, Procurement Panel: Document #RS.SS.225863a.NS.1771.PP.24)

Senator Gopple: Admiral Jerjerrod, you have indicated to this panel that you have certain misgivings concerning the procurement procedure of our fair Republic. Could you explain why you insist on undermining the Republic's confidence in her Navy with your public statements, rather than going through the chain of command as is proper for a military officer?

Admiral Jerjerrod: The Senator from Erigorm has not scanned my reports very thoroughly. I have reported to the proper people above me and to my peers within the Naval Command. My public statements, as you choose to call them Senator, were taken from those reports I so filed. I had nothing to do with their dissemination.

Senator V'troren: But if you did not leak these reports to the media, who did? Who else would have had the motivation to promulgate your particular point of view?

Admiral Jerjerrod: Senator V'troren, every being serving knows that the weapons he uses, the ships on which he serves, the Droids and computers on which his life depends, every piece of equipment which he will expect to use, was designed as a result of a Senate compromise to keep each constituent commercial interest happy. Upon entering combat with such equipment a crewman's sole consolation is a grim satisfaction that our enemies probably stole their equipment from us.

COUNTER-SLICER TEAM FORMED

SBI ARCOLOGY, CORUSCANT-SBI Director Armand Isard announced the formation of an Intelligence Committee specially dedicated to the protection of government HoloNet channels, and countering the efforts of Separatist slicers who have been transmitting CIS propaganda.

"The communications backbone of the Republic has become a favored target of the Separatists," said Isard at a media conference yesterday. "Some attacks have been outright destructive, but the insidious attempts to taint our channels with disinformation and viral data is just as dangerous."

The various Offices of Analysis scattered throughout the galaxy will begin assigning agents to the new Cryptanalysis Department, including the Central Office of Analysis on Coruscant. Heading up the new Core department is Sub-Director Ilko Deminar.

"Our recruitment methods for the crypt teams are aggressive and unprecedented, which is indicative of the importance of the matter," said Isard.

While the department leaders will all be drawn from existing Intelligence agents, they have been given clearance to recruit civilian and private sector data experts. The candidate test is simple. A unique encrypted recruitment guide is transmitted to the potential hire. Details on the next step can be determined only by decrypting the guide.

"Our first A-list candidates have already been contacted. I am eagerly awaiting the responses for our prospective lignyots," said Deminar, using the code-phrase for the potential cryptanalysis agents.

"I'm not at liberty to say what the term lignyot identifies," said Deminar, joking with reporters. "Perhaps figuring it out is the test to get my job."

CIS JAMMER PROTOTYPE DESTROYED

DORUM, BALAMAK-Transmission networks resumed functioning today in the Taldot sector when Republic forces destroyed an experimental jamming platform employed by the Separatists.

Communications had been disrupted for four standard days, following the arrival of a Confederacy of Independent Systems flotilla over Balamak, an important food-producing world in the Mid Rim. One Separatist vessel was a Trade Federation Droid Control Ship with a modified transmission array to broadcast jamming signals capable of disrupting a key HoloNet node.

A Republic task force, led by Jedi Obi-Wan Kenobi and Nanda-Ree Janoo engaged the flotilla with a starfighter attack. It was Kenobi's apprentice, Anakin Skywalker, who delivered the missile volley that destroyed the jamming craft. Victory is also being credited to Adar Tallon, the renowned starfighter tactician who planned the attack.

REPUBLIC ARMY LIBERATES BASSADRO

AGAO, BASSADRO -- Jedi General Empatojayos Brand's twilight push against the Separatists holed in the Agao Ranges has won the twelve-day Battle of Bassadro. Brand led his armored battalion of clone troopers to the rain-slicked obsidian crags of Bassadro's dormant volcanic ranges that offered cover to the Separatist forces. Brand ordered concussive missile strikes against the rock formations, not only destroying the Separatist's cover but also decimating the battle droid infantry with the resulting razor-sharp shrapnel. The Separatist commander, Major Domb Treedor, a Skakoan, signed a treaty with Brand, surrendering Bassadro and its mineral wealth back to the Republic fold.

Confederation Of Independent Systems Shadowfeed

Dispatch 14:2:14 Edition

Republic Continues Illegal Aargau Presence

IBC ARCOLOGY, AARGAU-Despite eight months of diplomatic dialogue involving the highest ranks of the InterGalactic Banking Clan, the Republic continues to post military forces within neutral territories of Aargau, disregarding the banking world's neutrality in the war.

Citing protection of Republic citizenry and businesses completing transactions on Aargau, Republic authorities moved several companies of troops into the major centers, even going as far as positioning guards within the immense pyramidal IBC Arcology.

"Aargau law clearly stipulates that noncitizens cannot be armed while on-planet," said Lo Vapeet, Vice-Chair of Communications for the IBC. "These heavily armored soldiers are bristling with deadly weaponry, in direct violation to planetary law and the planet's neutrality."

The unauthorized troops came to Aargau as a result of the disappearance of a Republic inspection team attempting to pin the origins of Hailfire Droids captured on Geonosis to manufacturing plants within the IBC Arcology. To date, no evidence of either the inspection team or the manufacturing plants have been produced, yet the troops remain.

"Aargau has always promised neutrality to our investors despite any political upheavals. The presence of these troops is unsettling and has resulted in notable currency fluctuations in Confederate and uncommitted worlds," said Vapeet.

Once the Aargau Executive Board began exploring secession in protest, the Republic responded with diplomatic envoys including Camaasi representatives.

"We are certain that an equitable compromise can be reached," said Republic Diplomat Gaddatha In'Kro. "The IBC has known Separatist connections. Perhaps if they reduced the number of armed combat droids on the premises, we would not feel the need to be as protective of Republic assets."

"These security droids are the property of Banking Clan executives holding citizenship on Aargau," said Lo Vapeet. "As per the Aargau Charter, citizenry are constitutionally mandated to be armed; this extends to the use of combat automata to those whose liquid assets afford them Premium Citizenship."

Dooku Addresses "Spurious" Republic Reports

KAANTAY, NEIMOIDIA-Count Dooku assured the security of the central headquarter-worlds of the Confederacy of Independent Systems following dubious reports from the Republic media that Jedi-led incursions had conquered essential Separatist commands.

"By reading the spurious reports from Coruscant regarding our withdrawal from such temporary worlds as Raxus Prime and Ord Janon, the Republic would have its citizenry believe we are on the run," said Dooku. "Given the graft rampant in the Senate, it comes as no surprise that their biased media agencies are just as corrupt."

Dooku further boasted about the strength of the Separatist military protecting the commercial headquarters of the constituent trade guilds. "The forces on our borders and outlying colonial assets are admittedly facing greater numbers, but with our inexhaustible supply of troops and materiel from the Neimoidian coffer-worlds, Techno Union home foundries and mighty guild-worlds, it's only a matter of time before the Republic is overwhelmed."





**THE CLONE WARS
ADVENTURE CONTINUES...
OBI-WAN AND PLO KOON
ARE TRAPPED IN A
SPACE STATION.
IT WILL SELF-DESTRUCT
AT ANY MOMENT.**

Use web camera to view. See back for details.



**MEANWHILE ON
ALZOC III...
BOUNTY HUNTER
CAD BANE HAS STOLEN
A DANGEROUS WEAPON.
CLONE TROOPERS ARE
UNDER HEAVY ATTACK.**

Use web camera to view. See back for details.



**WITHOUT YOU,
ALL WILL BE LOST.
THE REPUBLIC
NEEDS A HERO.
JOIN.**

Use web camera to view. See back for details.

LETTER FROM CHRISTOPHISIS

The following letter, from Padawan Ahsoka Tano to her friend Tallisibeth Enwandung-Esterhazy, represents a rare

Hey Scout,

Well, here I am. I just helped kick the Separatists off a planet called Christophisis in Sauron sector, and I have a new Jedi Master called... wait for it... SKYWALKER! Yeah, that one! Turns out he's only four or five years older than me. Might be cute if he didn't have that weight-of-the-galaxy thing on him all the time. (I know, Jedi Code and all. A girl still notices!)

Anyway! The battle started without me, so this first bit is just what I heard from the clones. The Separatists invaded Christophisis to cut off our forces in the Outer Rim, and to prepare for a strike at Kamino and Rothana, which would be pretty much a huge disaster. They put a droid army down on the surface, so General Kenobi sent in Skywalker and three Jedi cruisers—but when they got there, they found one of the big Separatist fleets in orbit, lots of battleships under a Seppie called Admiral Trench.

Skyguy (that's what I call him—I think he kinda likes it) decided to attack the blockade anyway, which didn't really work, so General Kenobi wasn't all that happy when he showed up with the flagship to find the other Jedi cruisers all beat up. Thankfully, he brought along a new ship that could sneak through the blockade (the clones wouldn't tell me more than that), and Skyguy insisted on flying it down with supplies for the refugees. Then, halfway down, he decided to divert into the blockade and attack Trench's cruiser... which was a bit crazy but also sort of the right thing to do.

So, Skyguy's broken the blockade, but there's still this droid army in Crystal City, commanded by a big alien with a weird accent. I think his name was Loathsom, and apparently he had his own tank regiment there as well. So Kenobi deploys the clone troopers to kick them out while Yularen stays topside with the Jedi cruisers to keep the rest of the Separatist fleet off their backs. But the clones keep getting ambushed when they try to set up a forward base, and someone manages to set off a bomb inside the main base that takes out all the AT-TEs. So we just lost our way of watching what the bad guys are doing, and our main ability to fight back. Not good!

Pretty quickly, General Kenobi realizes that this means the droids are about to attack, so he gets the clones to set up a defensive perimeter just in time to stop a big attack by the battle droid army, which turns out to be way bigger than we thought—lots of infantry, tank regiments, and these huge tri-droids. I saw the wreckage later.

firsthand account of this important battle; how it came to be among the papers of the Yularen family is unknown.

Anyway, I got there just after the artillery bit. It felt different, being in the middle of a battlefield. Kenobi and Skyguy and the clone commanders are all really military and professional and tall—but I think they like me. And you have no idea what it's like to see a front-line fleet in orbit, all the big ships up close in the starry blackness. Really cool.

Of course, as soon as I get down and introduce myself to Skyguy the droid cruisers come back and kick our fleet out of orbit. So we've got droids overhead, and droids a few blocks away, and just my shuttle for transport for the entire assault force... and to make matters worse, Loathsom has set up a deflector shield over his position that blocks our guns, and he's sending all kinds of droid tanks back to squish us, under the cover of the shield down so our guns can't stop them.

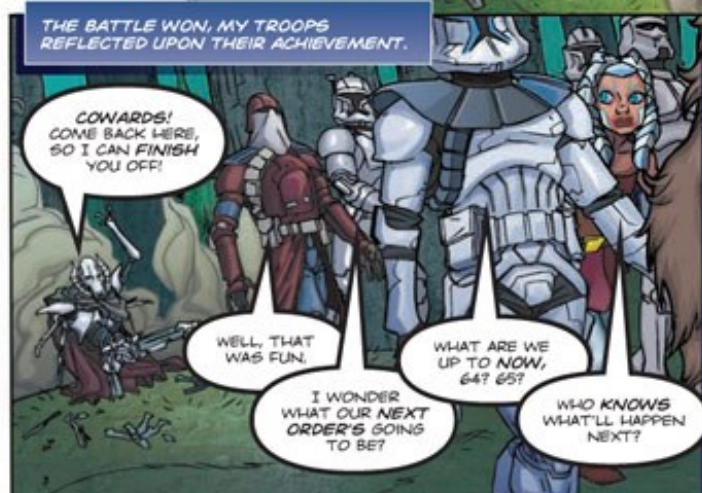
So Skyguy decides we have to take down the shield—and we means him and me. So, my first day on the job, and I'm sneaking into a Separatist base under the shield perimeter... and then these sentinel droids show up and start shooting, so Skyguy holds them off while I try and blow the shield generator. Yeah, I've been on Christophisis about an hour, and I have to pull a wall down on some droids to save my master's behind. He wasn't exactly grateful, but I think he just doesn't like it when he feels like he has to rely on other people.

While I'm off doing this crazy stuff, General Kenobi had been negotiating our surrender with General Loathsom, which I think was just to buy us time. Once the shield goes down (and did I mention that was me!) we can start shooting droid tanks again. And just when we've won, Master Yoda shows up with a big fleet from Coruscant. So maybe I didn't need to spend my lunch break dodging blasterfire. Still, I hope Skyguy noticed my moves, and the whole saving-his-life thing.

Anyway that was Christophisis—terrifying and exciting and exhausting. Now Skyguy and me and a bunch of clones are off on a secret mission, which of course means I can't tell you anything else, sorry. I'll write again soon, because I miss the Temple, and I miss you. At least I do when I get time to breathe!

Your friend,

AHSOKA.



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STAR WARS
MINIATURES



Out Foxed

Blaster fire rocketed past my head, shattering the stone wall behind me. These bounty hunters are becoming pretty bold, I thought, either that or just more stupid. There was a time when they wouldn't stray too far from the safety of the Outer Rim, but now they were almost a regular sight on the back streets of Coruscant. Count Dooku and the Separatists were willing to pay a hefty sum to anyone who could kidnap a member of the Galactic Senate, so any fool with a blaster and a starship headed here, to my town. And as the commander of the Coruscant Guard, it was my job to stop them. The Guard was made up of the most elite clone troopers in the Republic, and it was our duty to protect the Supreme Chancellor and the members of the Galactic Senate.

From behind an old speeder, a Trandoshan bounty hunter poked up his brown, reptilian head. I could see him cocking his ACP scatter gun. He had a nervous look in his orange eyes. He was in over his head, and he knew it. No bounty hunter had ever succeeded in kidnapping a Senator on Coruscant, not on my watch. When word came that Senator Shayla Paige-Tarkin was in danger, I mobilized my men immediately. Dooku wasn't the only one with spies: I knew about the Trandoshan's plot before his ship even landed at the space port. Very little happened on Coruscant that I didn't know about.

Vaaaash! A second shot screamed past my face. I felt bits of the blast ricocheting off of my armor. I raised my blaster and took aim. I had a clean shot. It was too bad that they wanted him alive; I'd have been happy to take him down. But those were my orders.

The Trandoshan took one look at my blaster and started to run. I was right behind him; there was no way that he could get away. I knew the streets of the old city better than anyone.

I commed to my men and within moments the streets were flooded with the familiar red armor of the Coruscant Guards. The bounty hunter froze in his tracks. There was no place for him to go ... but up. As it turned out, the Trandoshan had a rocket pack. I really should have spotted it earlier. Oh well, I was trained for these kinds of unexpected events. And with a quick shot of the ascension cable from my blaster, I was halfway up the side of the building before the bounty hunter landed on the roof.

After a few quick strides, I pulled myself over the ledge and onto the roof. Blasts from the Trandoshan's scatter gun tore past me. I pulled my blaster out as I dove behind an air vent, firing a few warning shots along the way.

"Surrender, bounty hunter!" I yelled as I rolled to my feet. The Trandoshan stood fixed in my sight. "There is no way out of here. Drop your blaster and put your scaly hands on your head."

"T'doshok no surrender!" he howled as his clawed finger squeezed the trigger of his scatter gun. Good thing the Trandoshans are slow, I thought as I squeezed the trigger of my own blaster. With a loud crack, my laser blast hit his gun and knocked it to the ground. The bounty hunter screamed something in Dosh as he grabbed his smoking claw.

"Give it up," I warned. "There's no way you'll make it out of my town alive. Surrender now and I promise you that you'll live."

The Trandoshan screamed something else in his native tongue as he eyed the ledge of the building. "And don't even think of using your rocket pack," I added. "I'll happily shoot you out of the sky."

The bounty hunter knew that he had lost. The fire drained from his orange eyes as he stood slumped on the rooftop, cradling his injured hand.

"When will you fools learn," I said to the bounty hunter as the rest of the Coruscant Guards came to the roof and took him into custody. "No one escapes from Commander Fox."

All New Characters! All New Action!

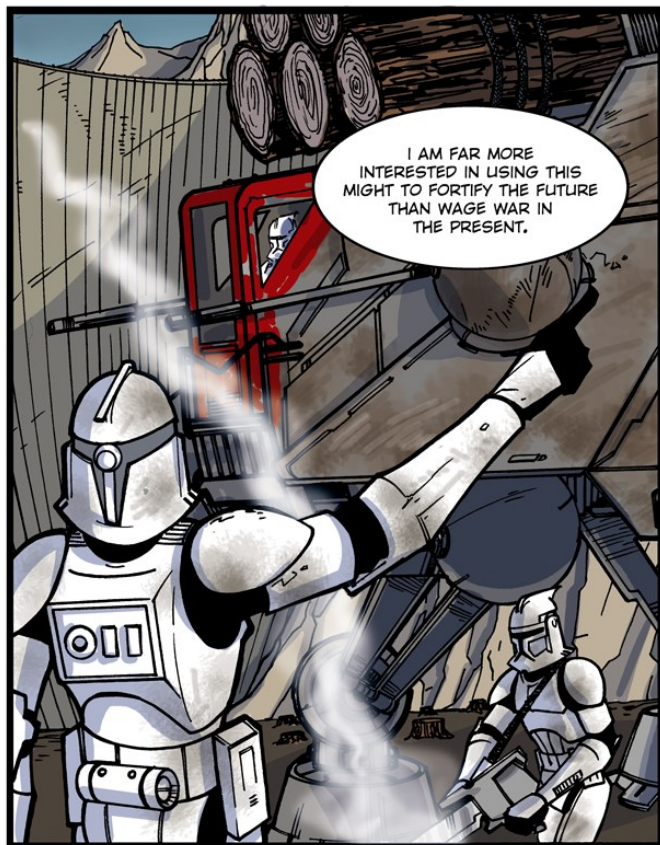
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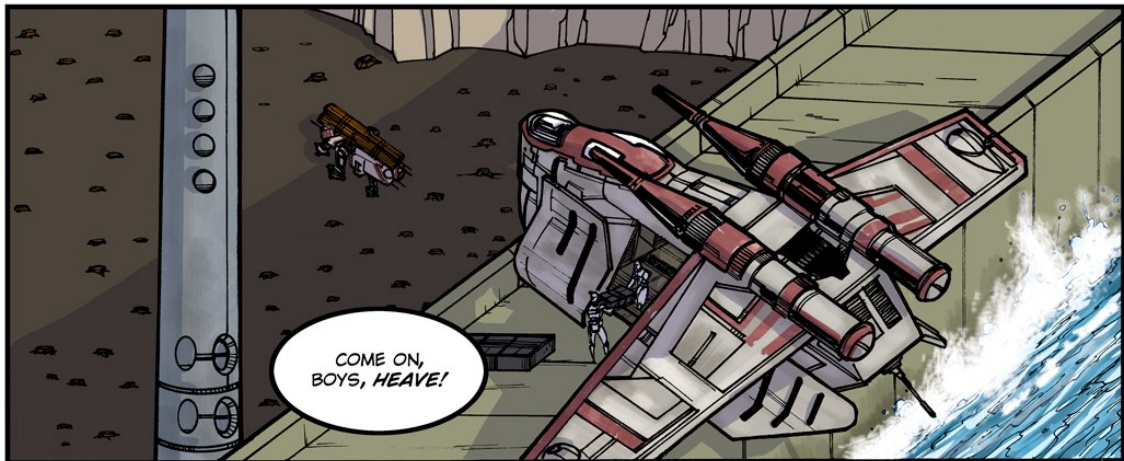
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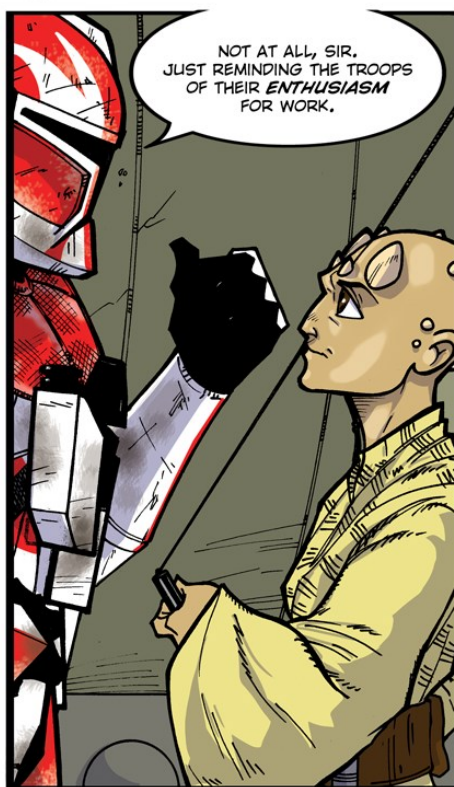
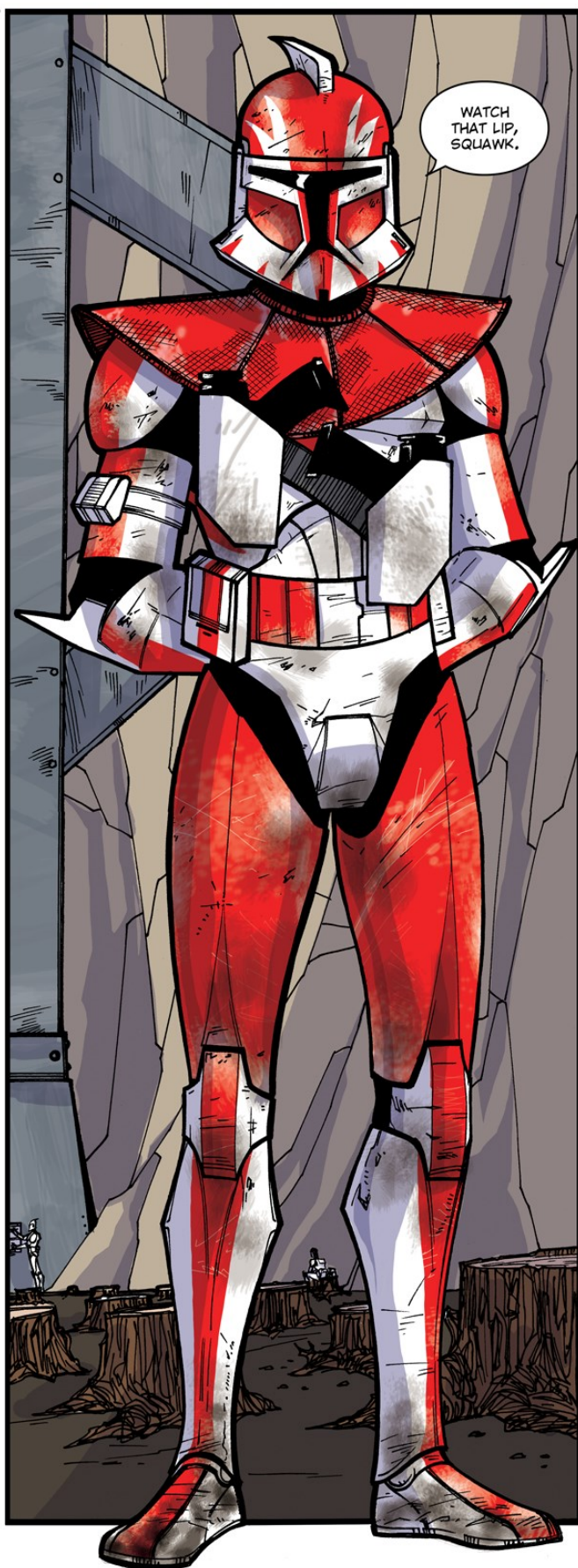


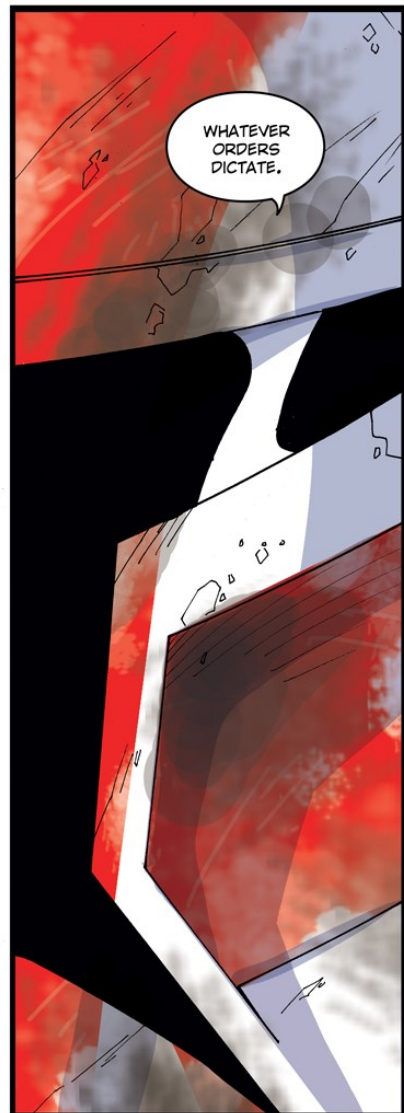
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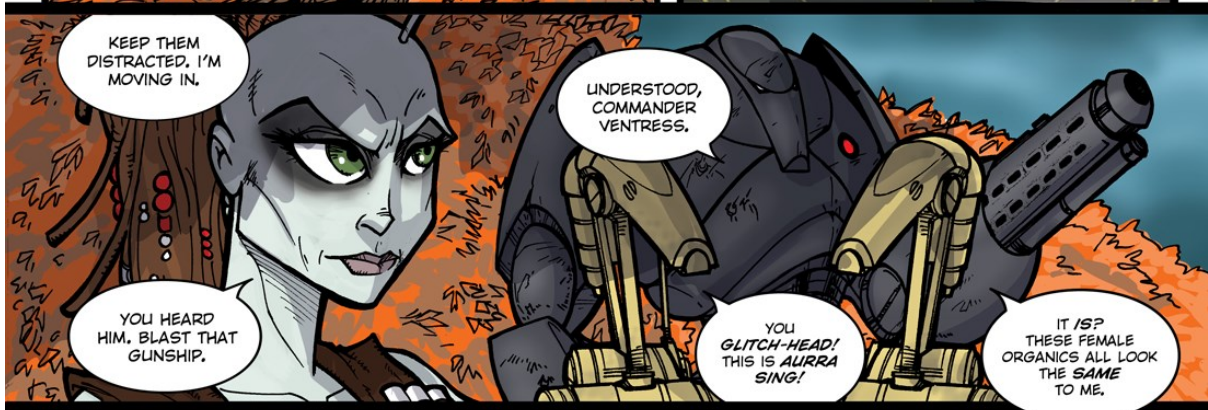


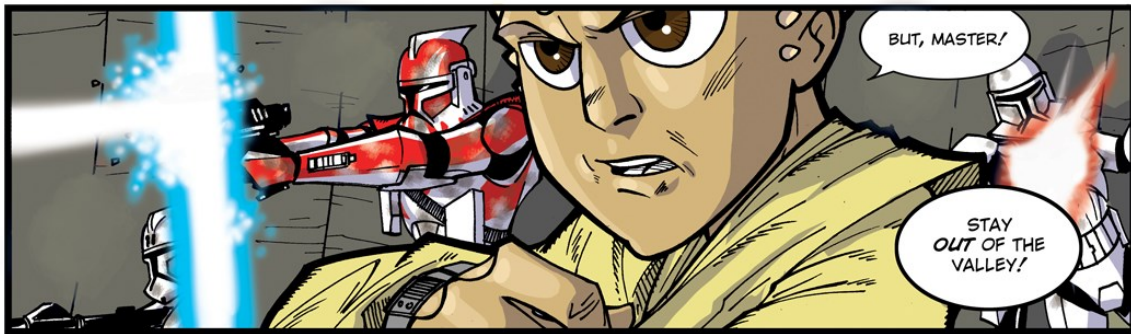


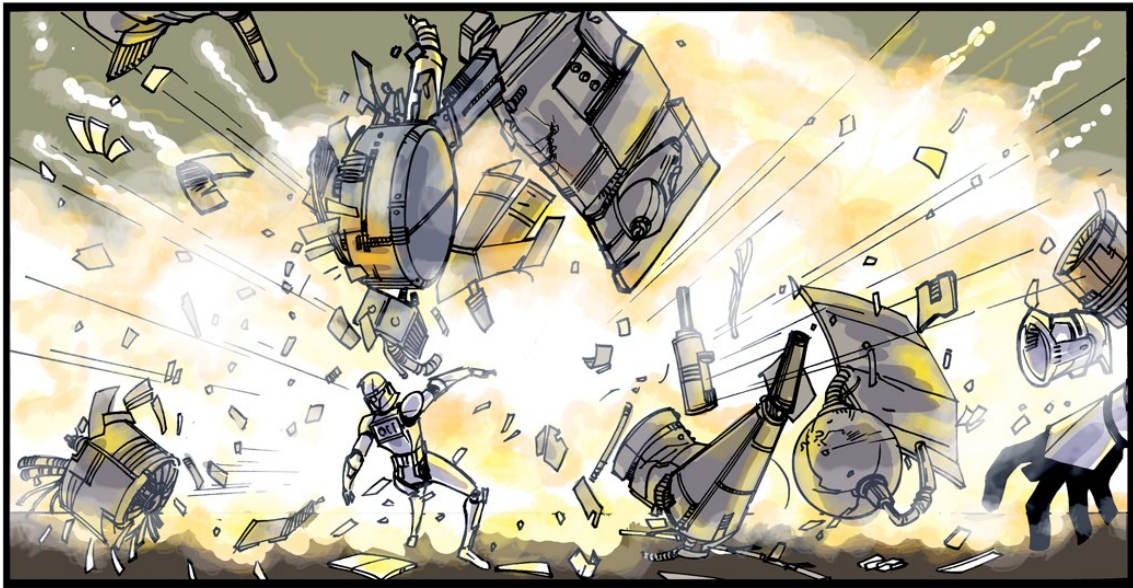


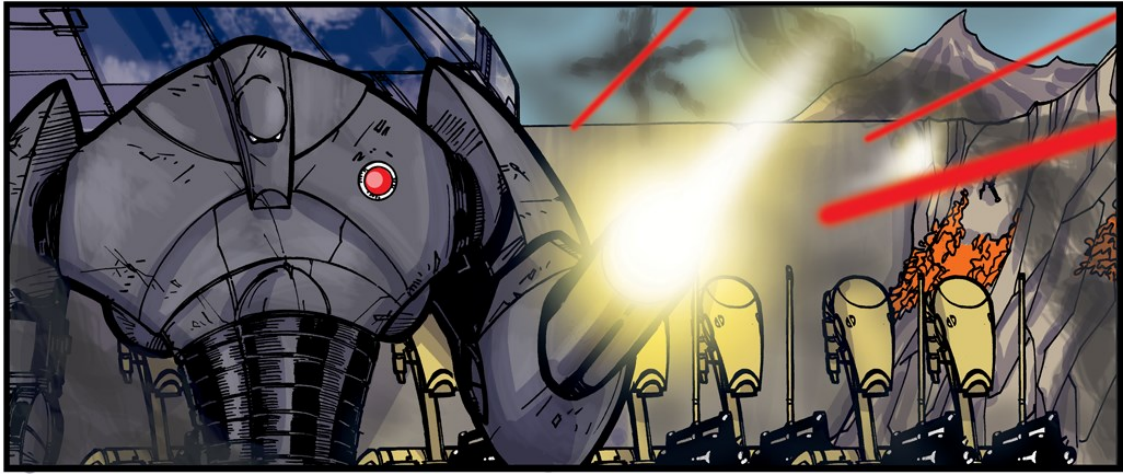


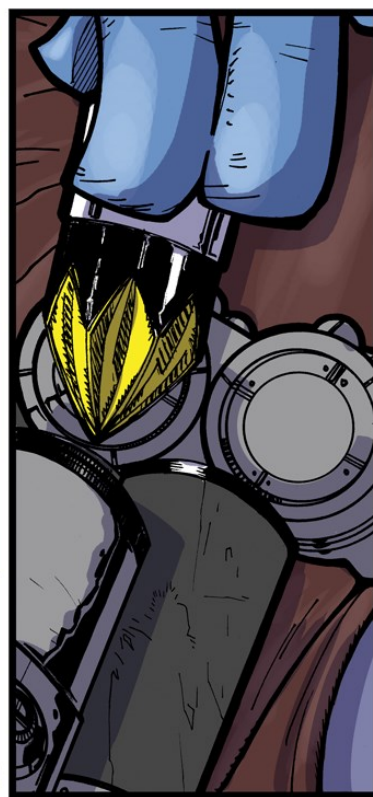
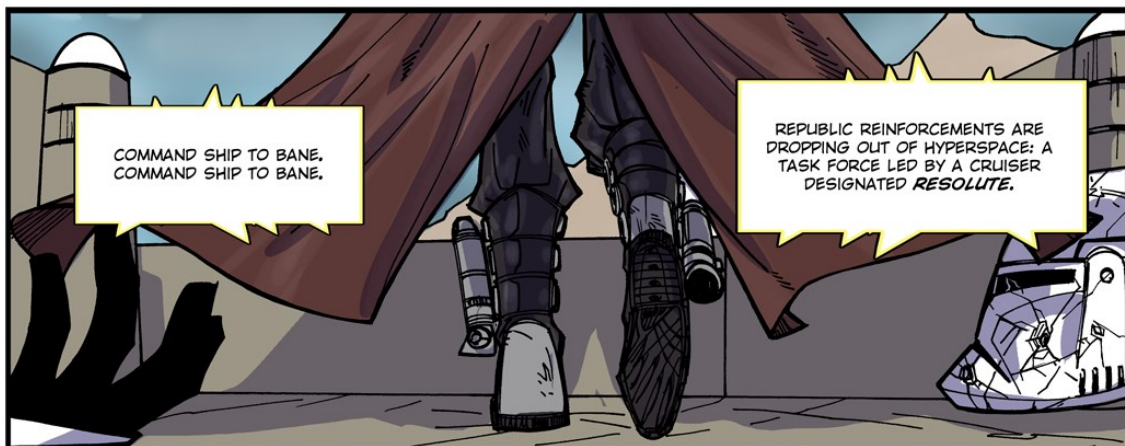


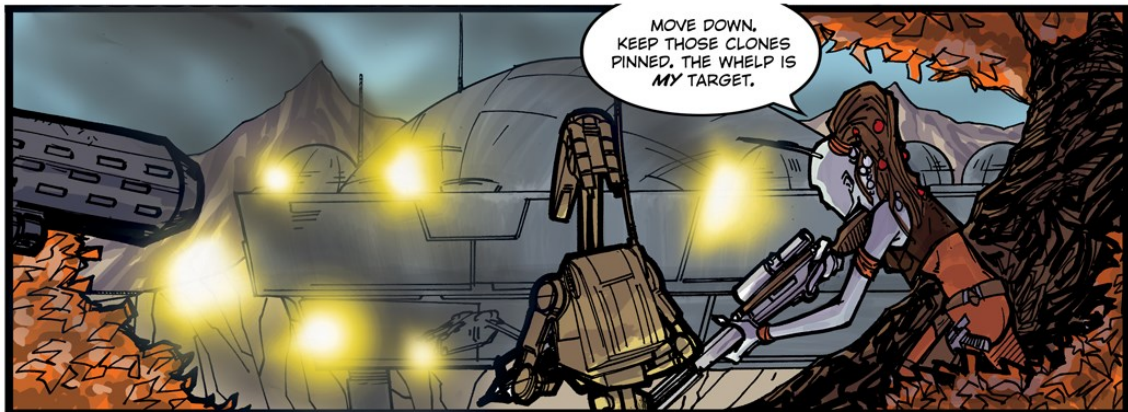




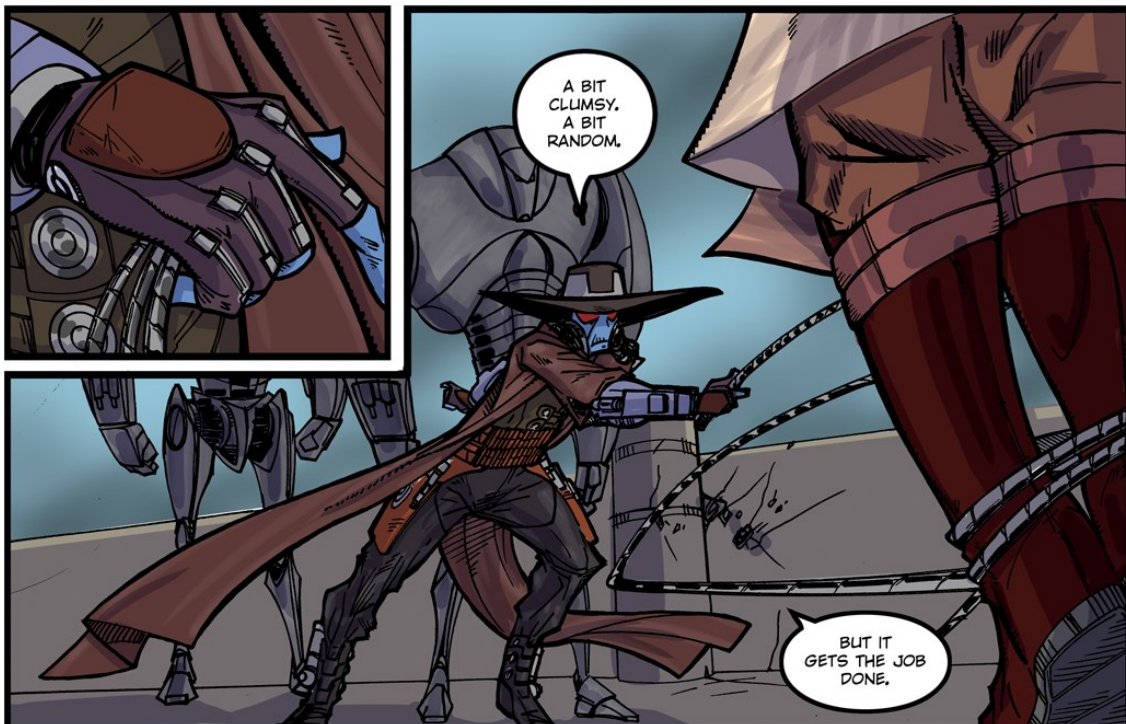


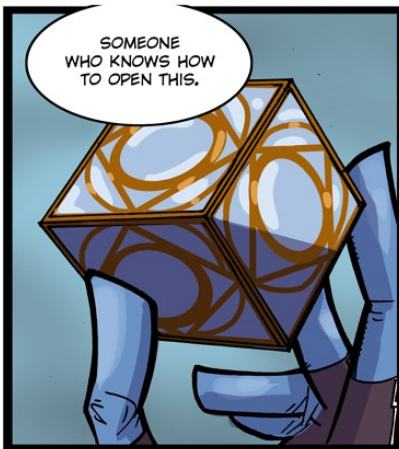
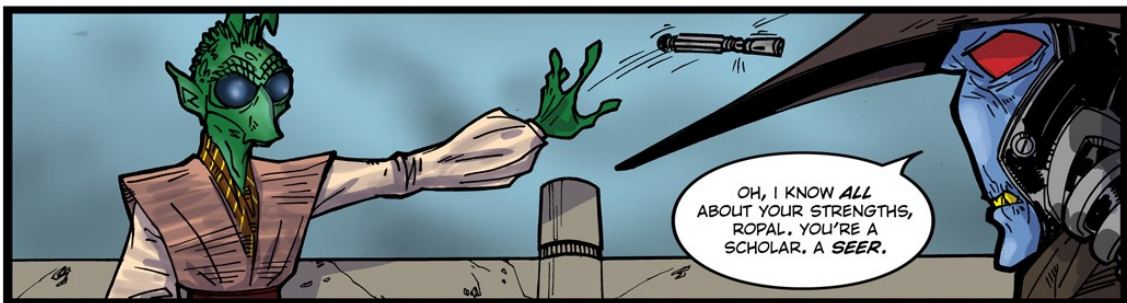




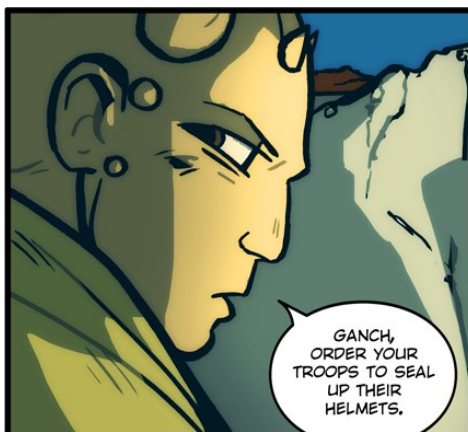


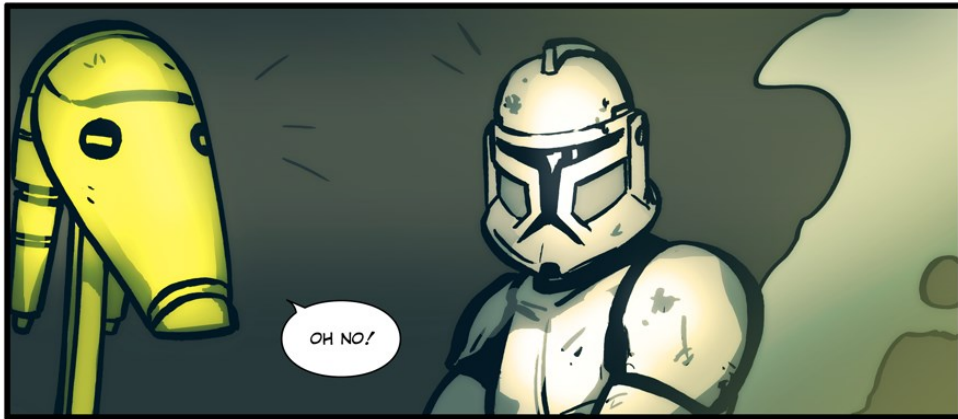


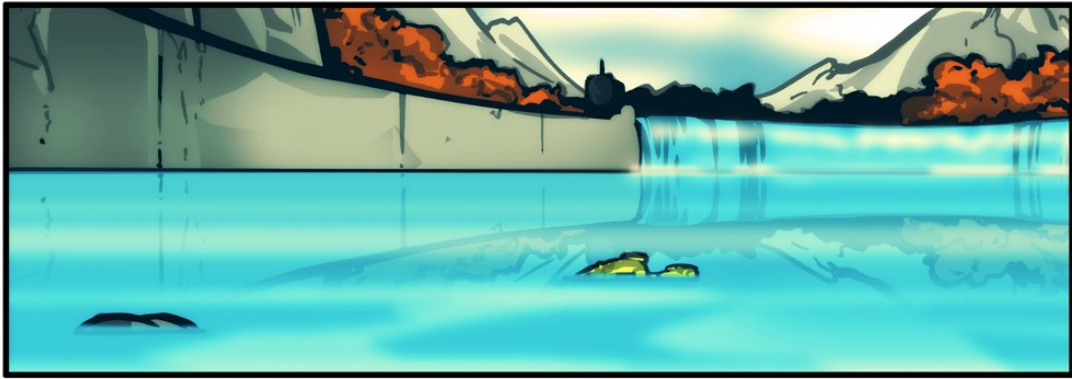




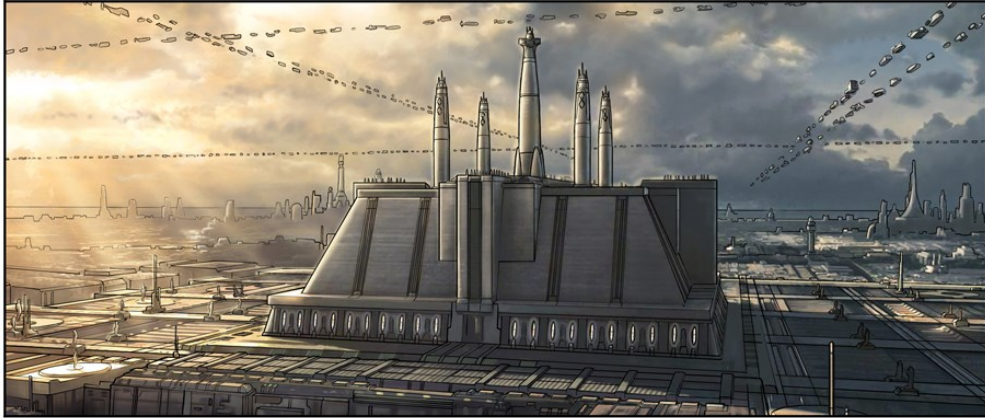


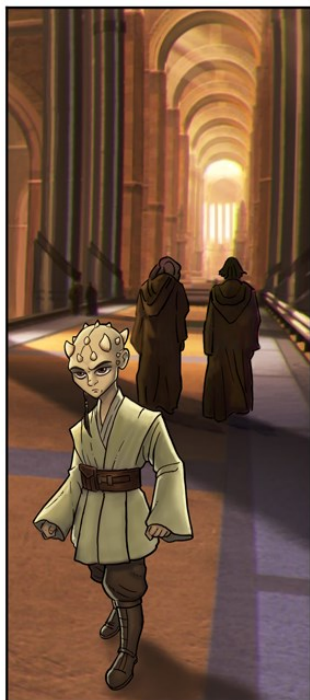
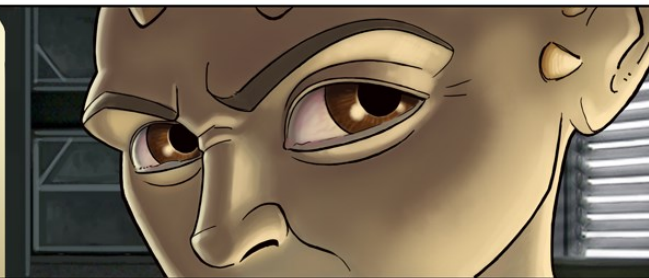
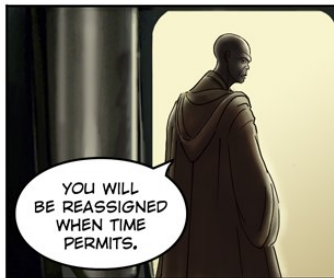


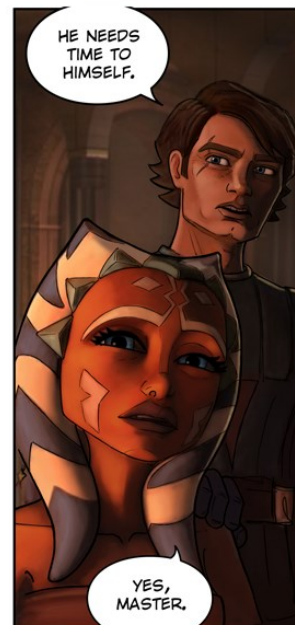


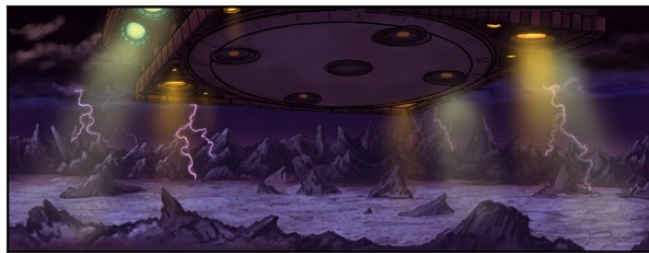
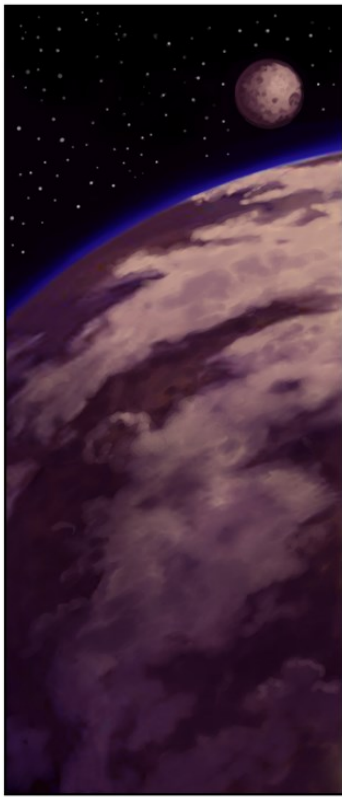




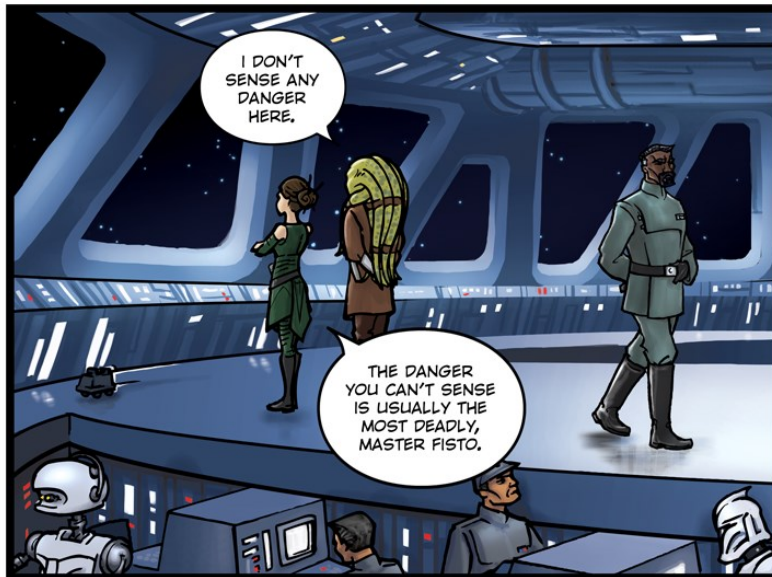


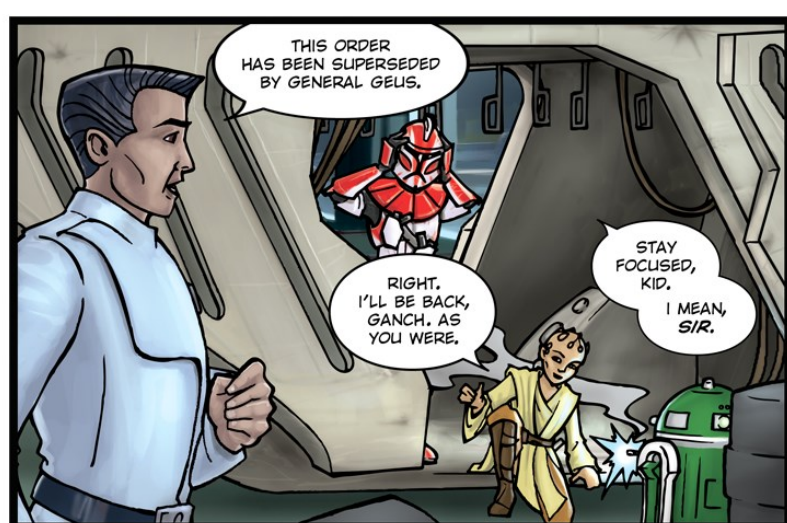
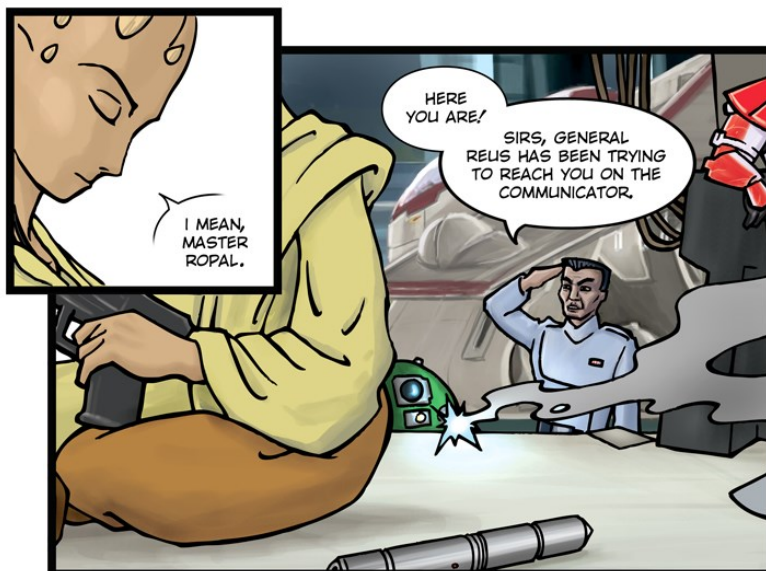
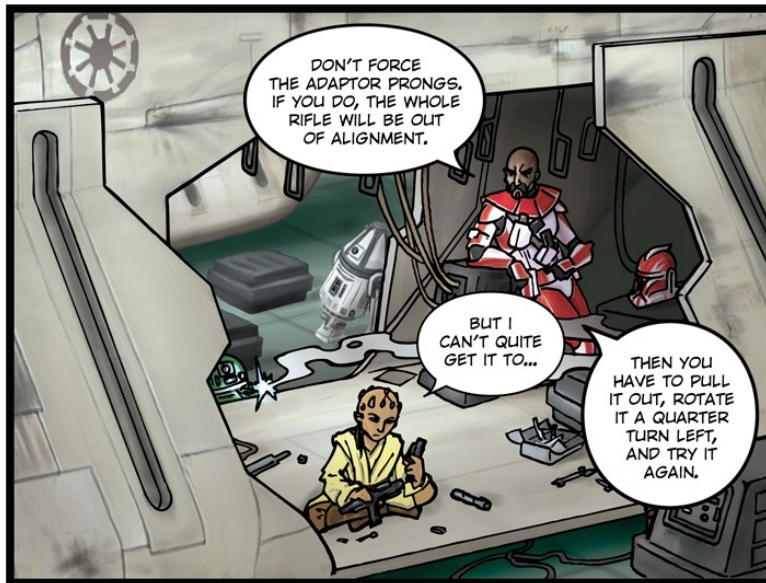


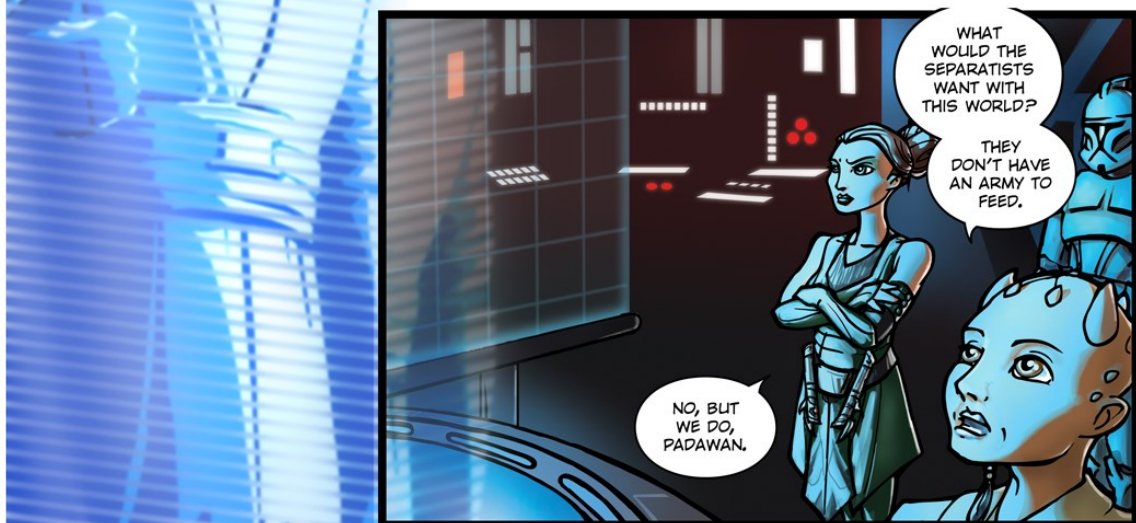
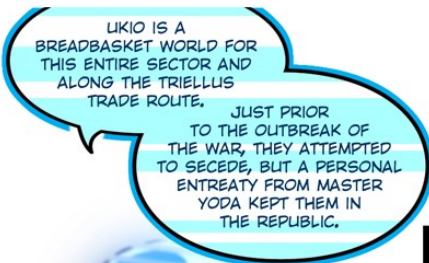
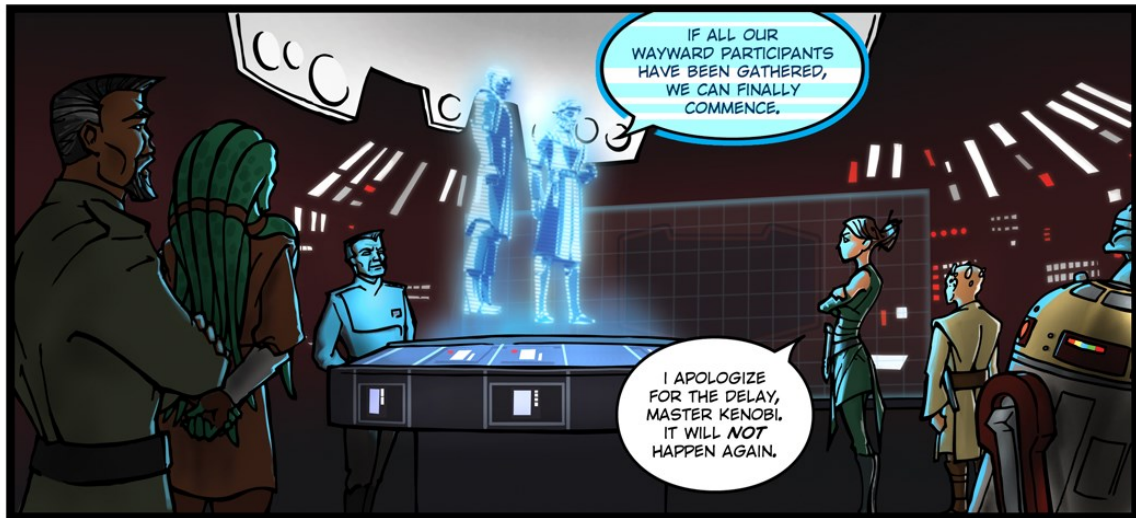


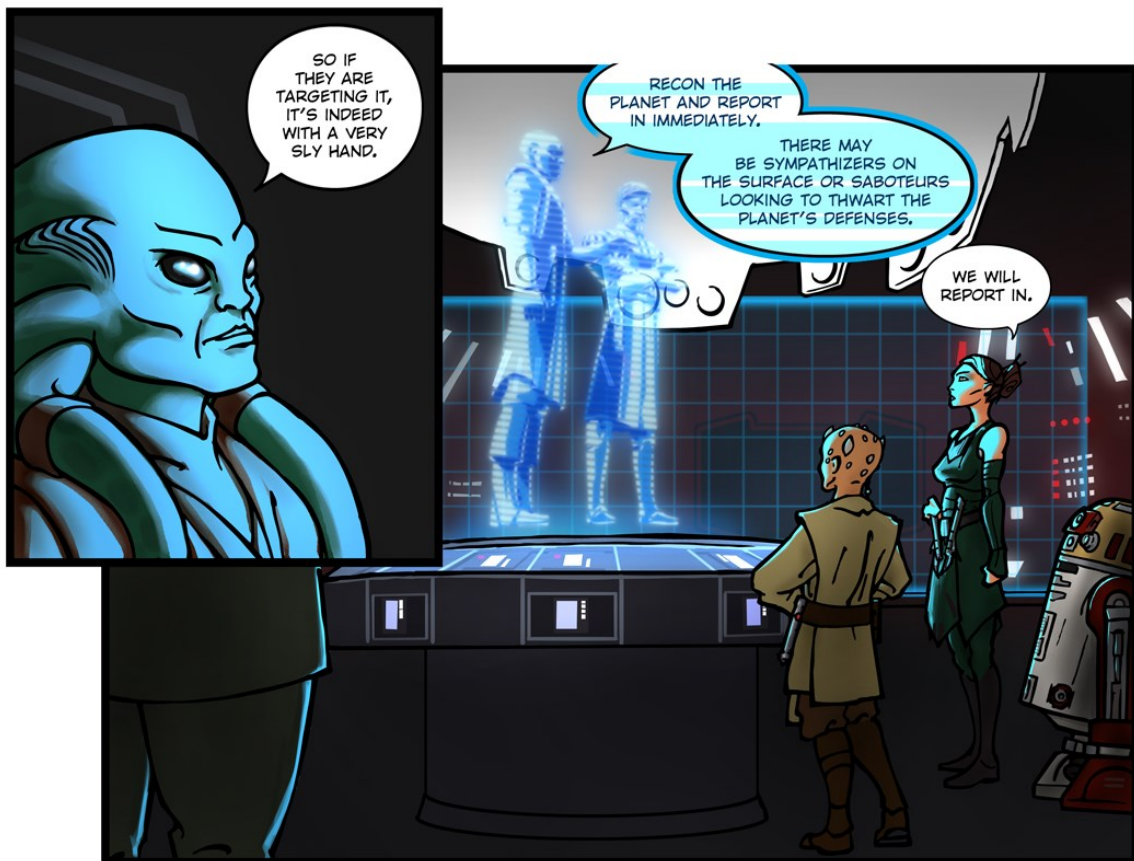
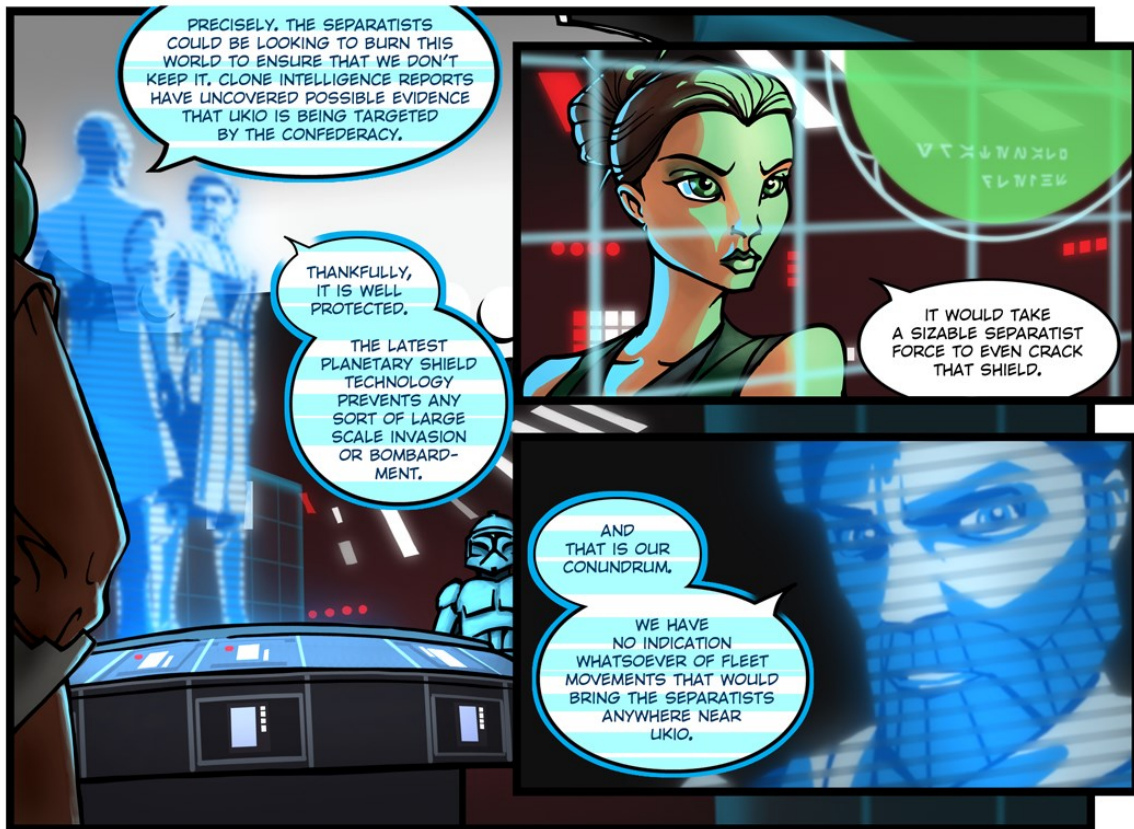


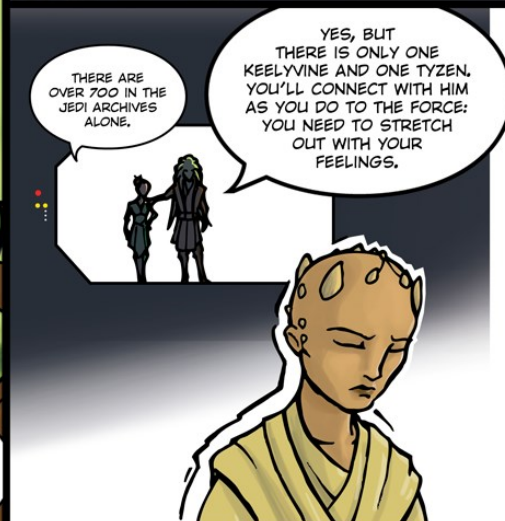
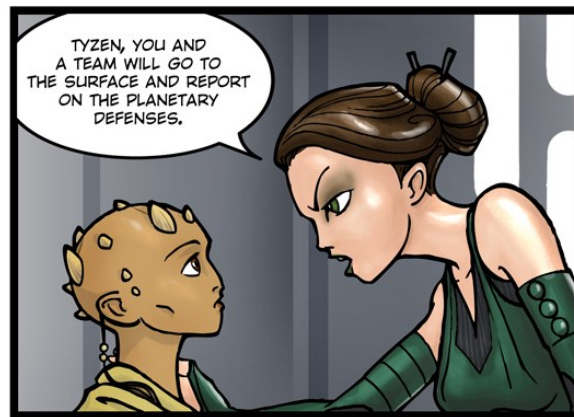


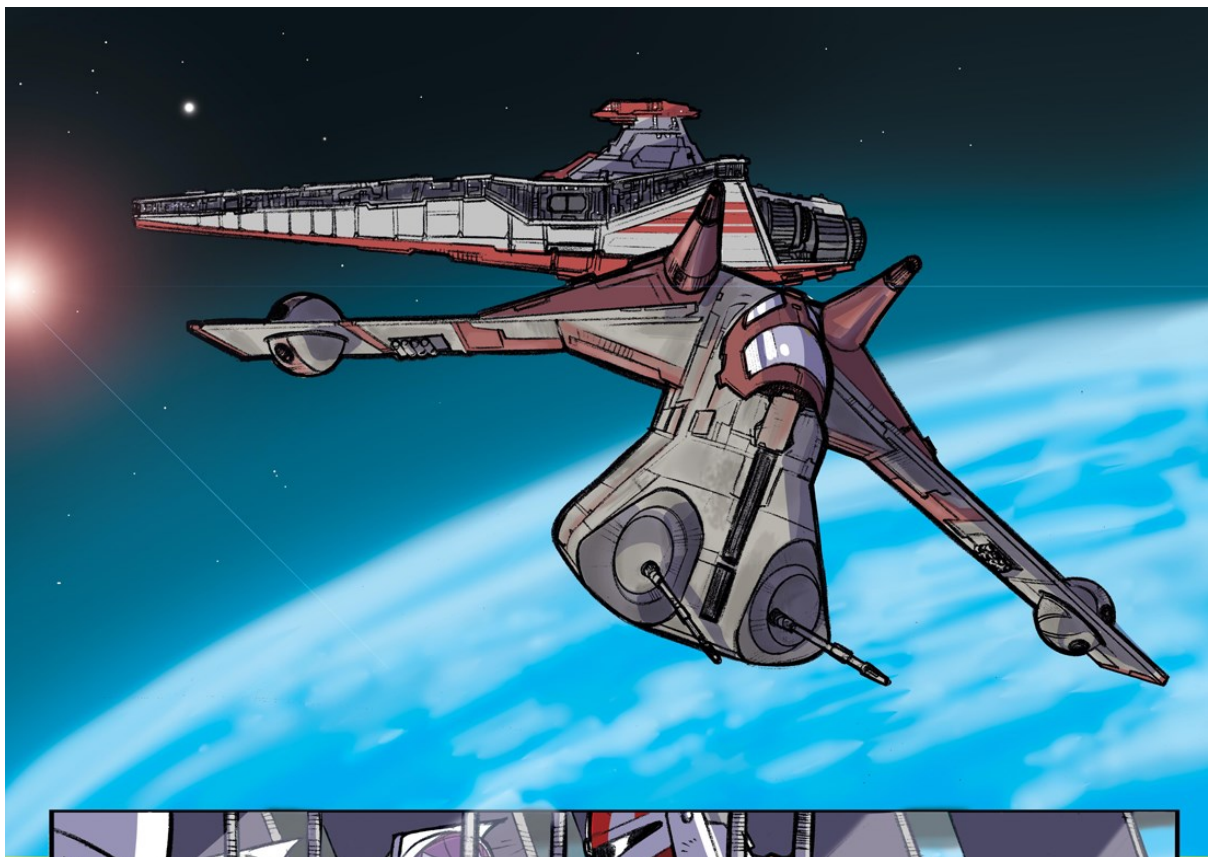












READY FOR DIRTSIDE, BOYS. HOPE YOU ALL BROUGHT SOMETHING INTERESTING TO READ.

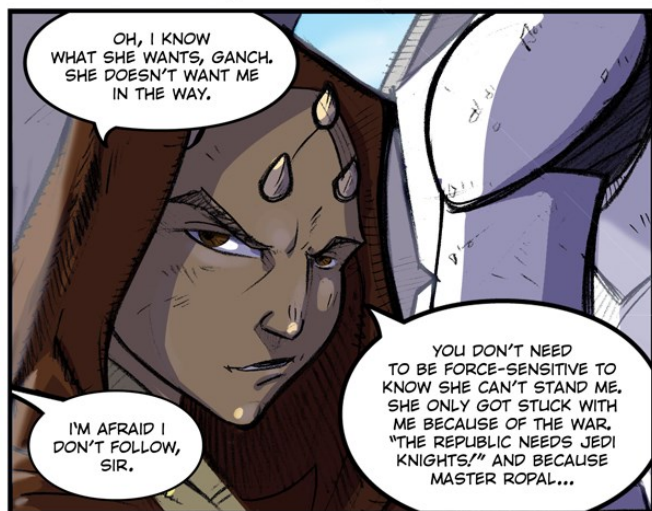
KEEP FOCUSED, SQUAWK.

HE'S GOT A POINT, GANCH. THOSE SHIELDS ARE ROCK SOLID. WE'RE IN FOR A QUIET TIME ON THE SURFACE.



YES, SIR, BUT THE GENERAL DOES WANT A TOP-TO-BOTTOM INSPECTION OF THE GROUND DEFENSES.

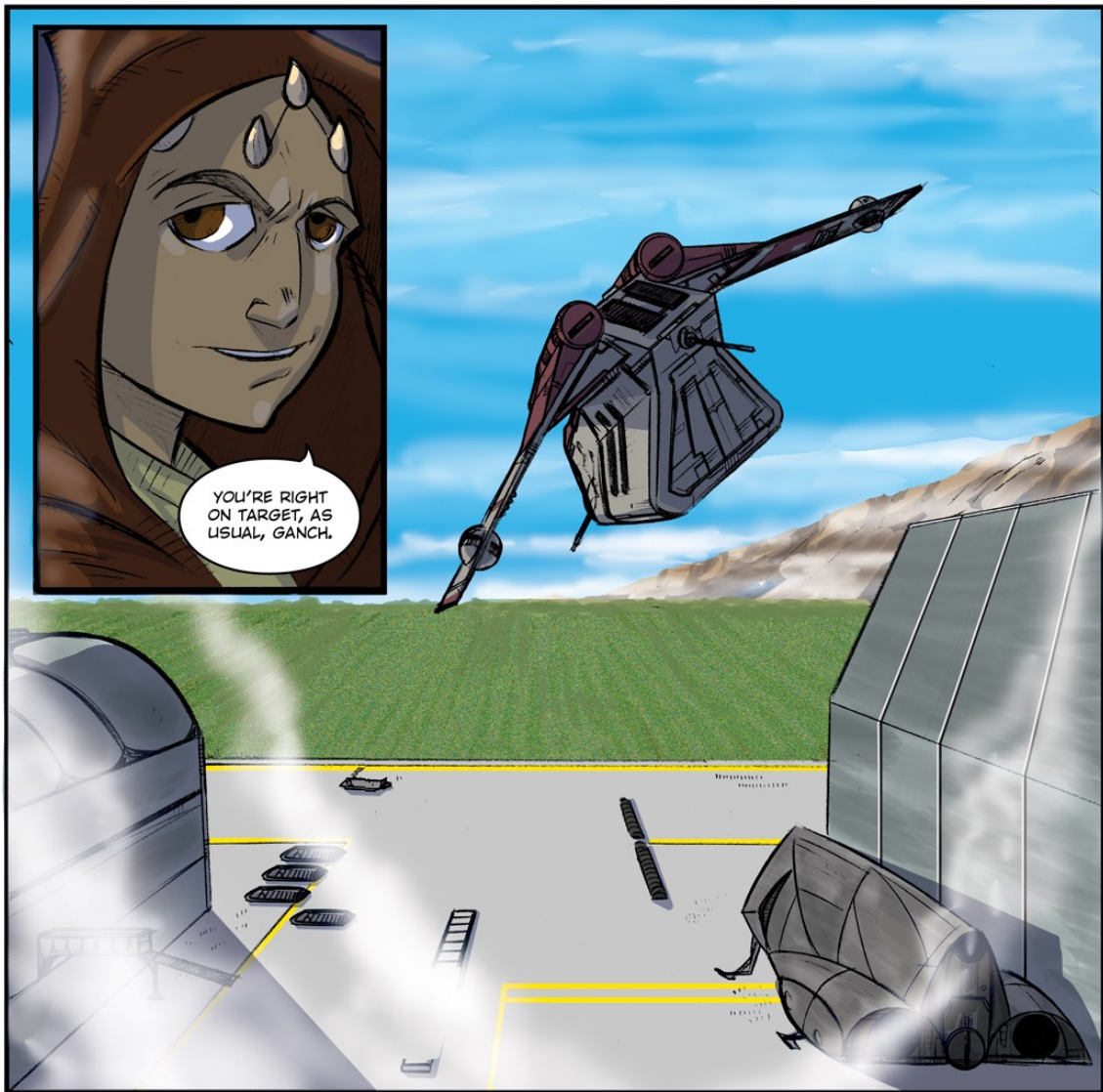
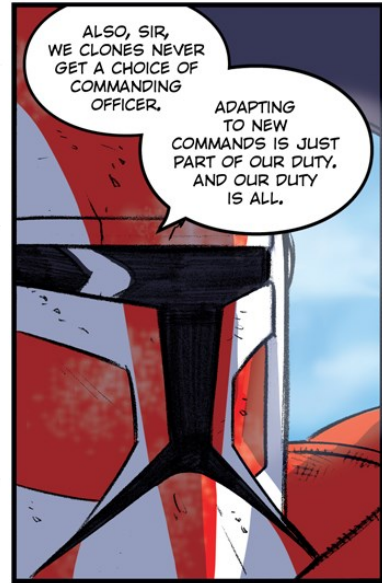
THAT'LL KEEP US BUSY.



OH, I KNOW WHAT SHE WANTS, GANCH. SHE DOESN'T WANT ME IN THE WAY.

I'M AFRAID I DON'T FOLLOW, SIR.

YOU DON'T NEED TO BE FORCE-SENSITIVE TO KNOW SHE CAN'T STAND ME. SHE ONLY GOT STUCK WITH ME BECAUSE OF THE WAR. "THE REPUBLIC NEEDS JEDI KNIGHTS!" AND BECAUSE MASTER ROPAL...

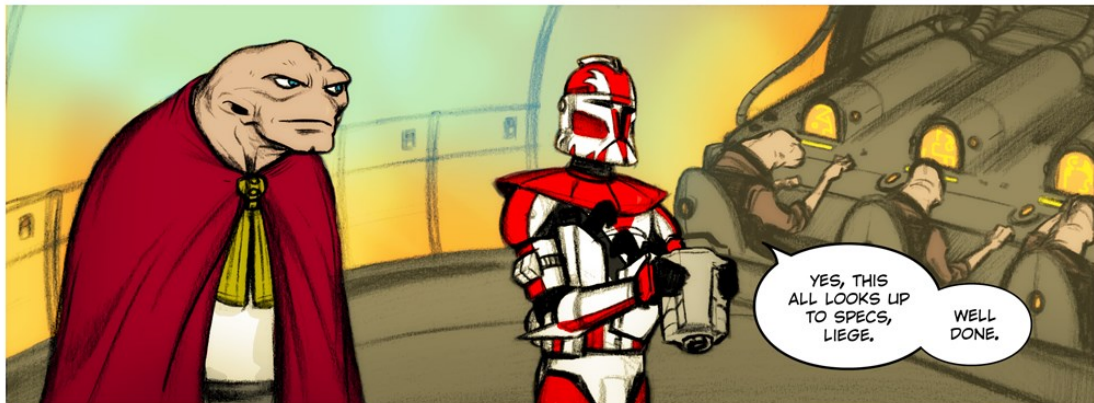
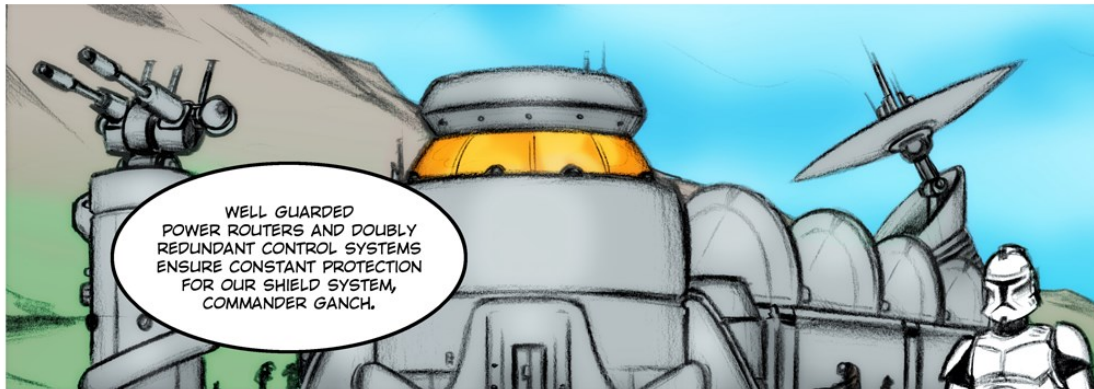




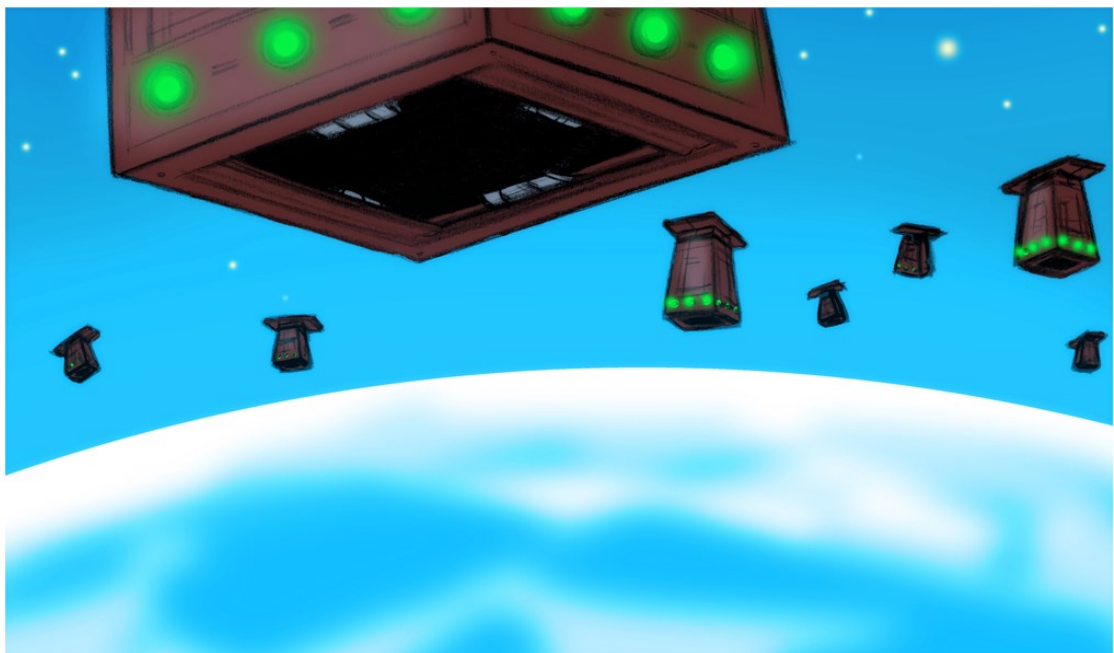
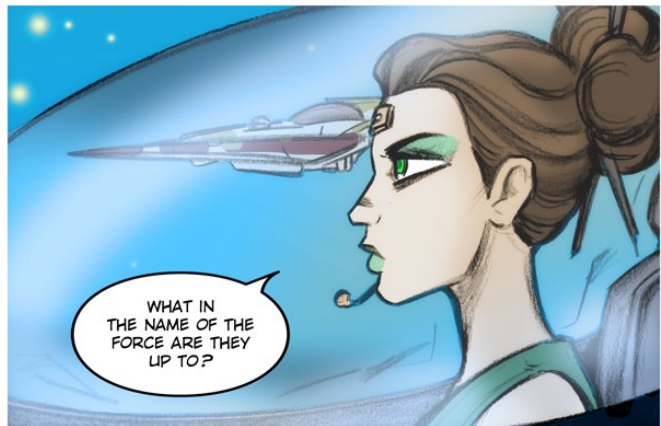


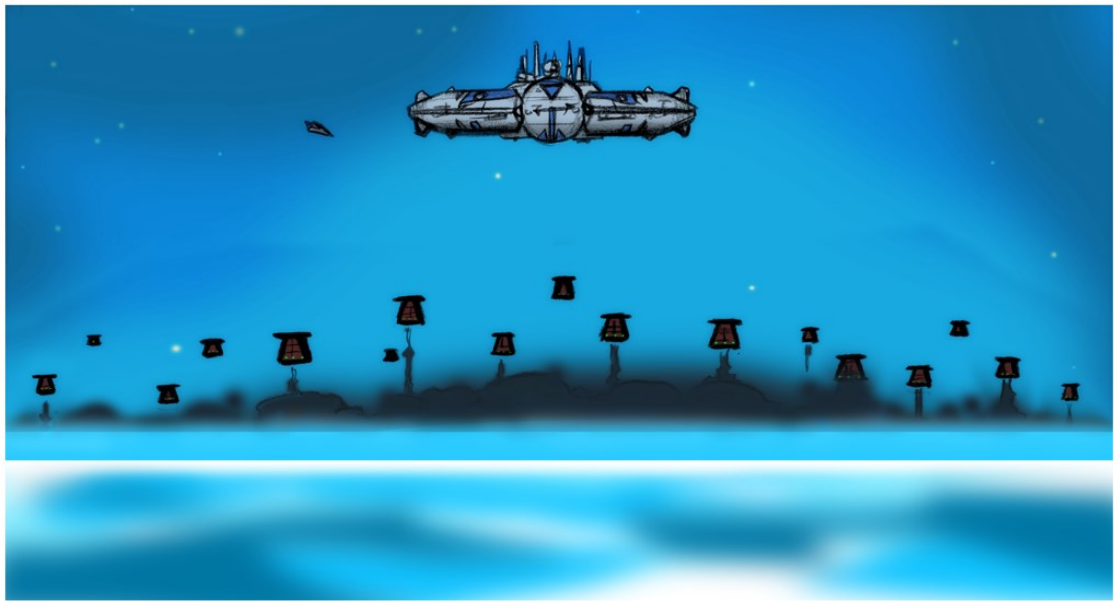


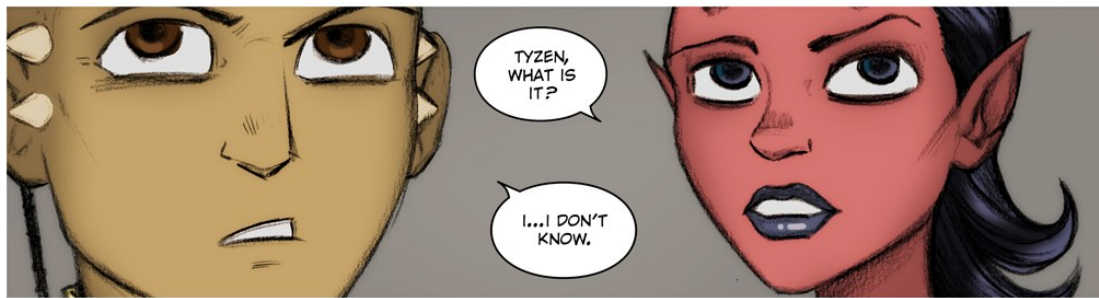




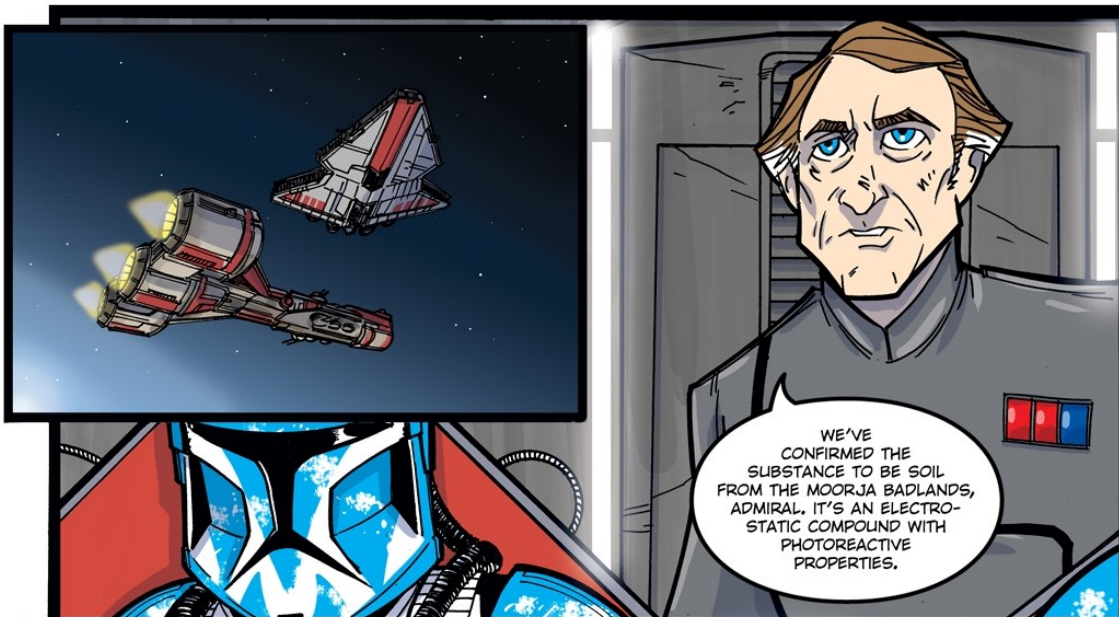














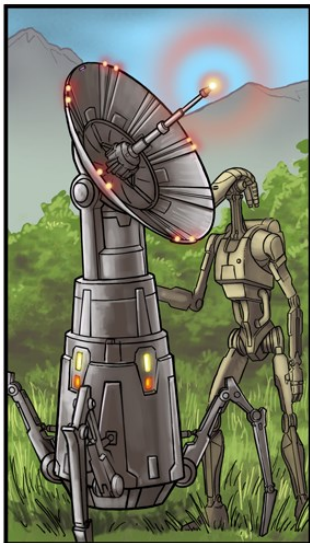
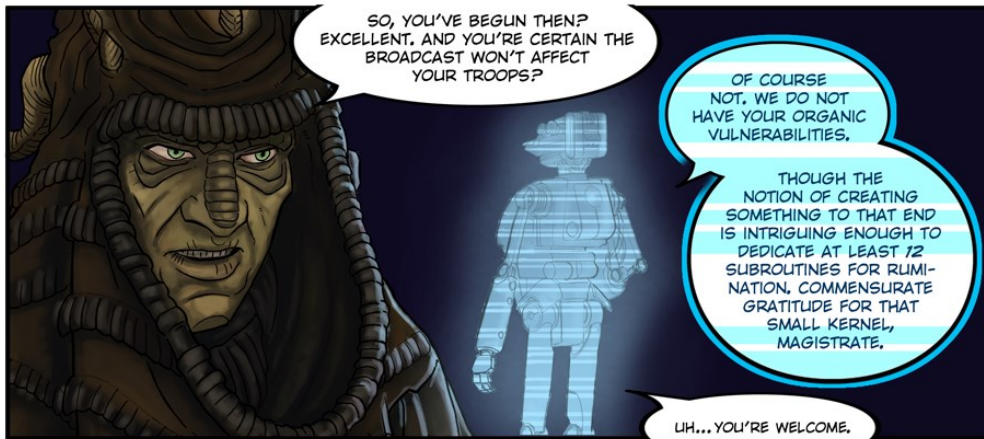
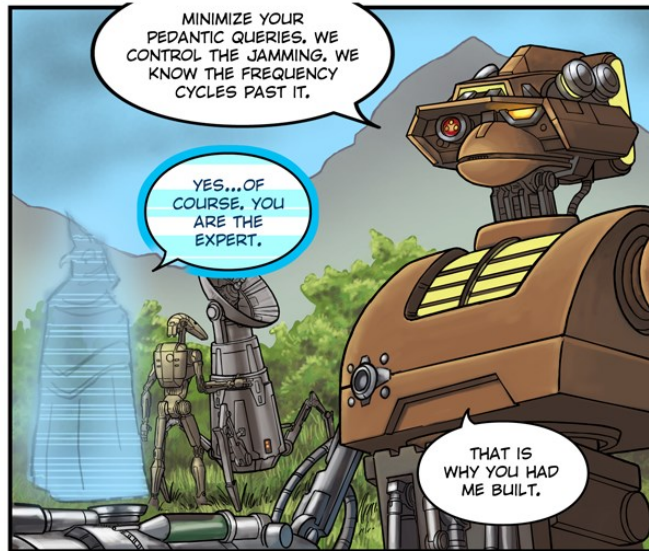




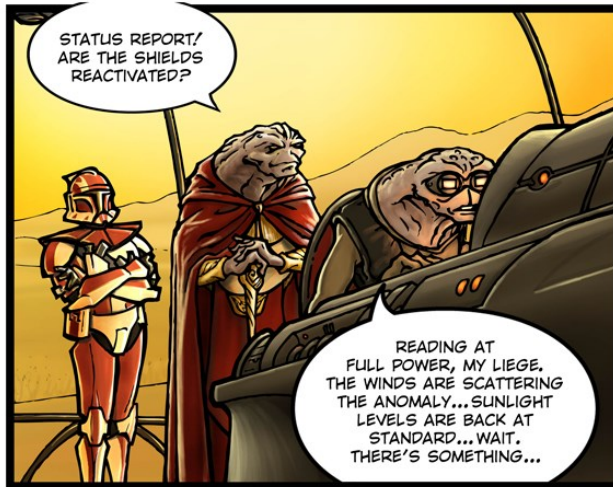












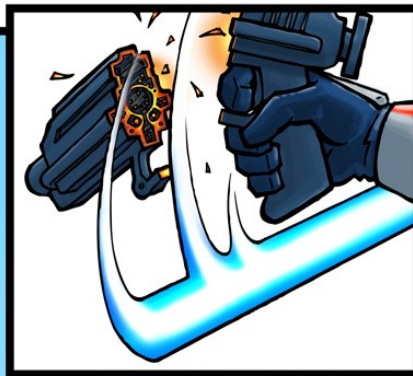
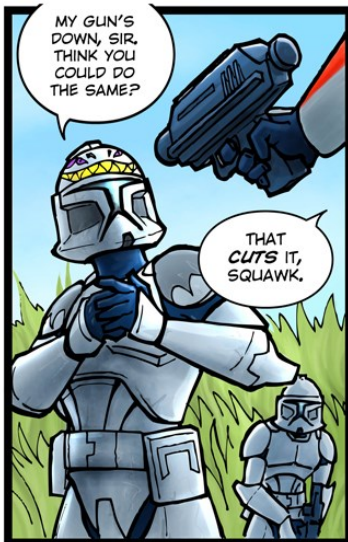
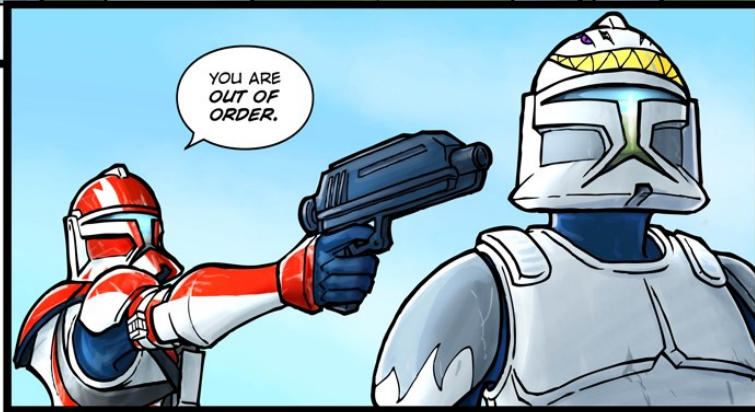
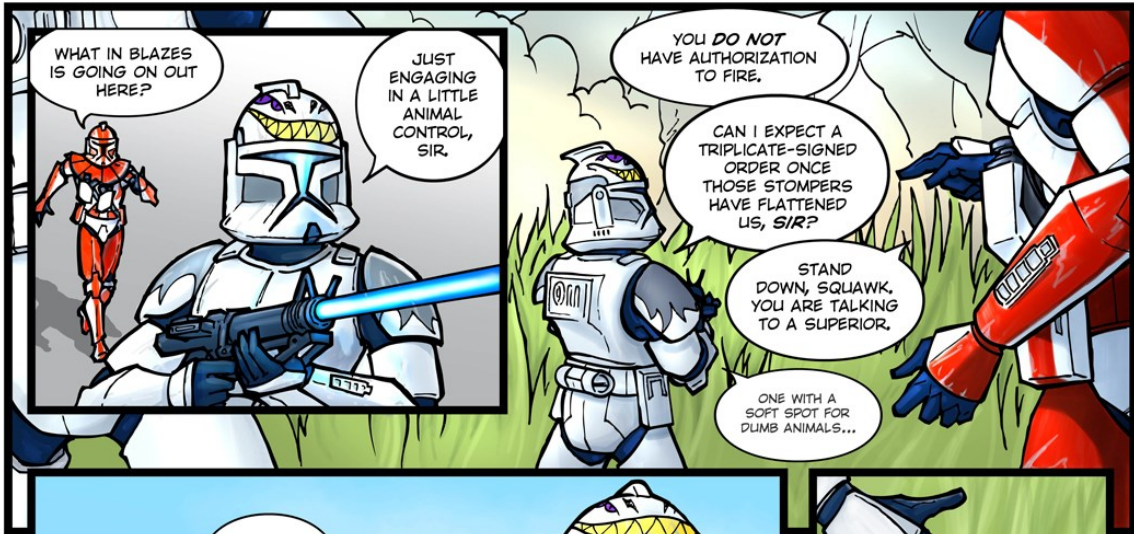


BEASTIES
ARE ON
THE MOVE.
THEY'RE
GETTING
CLOSER.

A LITTLE
TOO CLOSE FOR
MY COMFORT.

TIME TO SCARE THE
DUMB BRUTES OFF.

THEY AREN'T
BLASTER-PROOF.

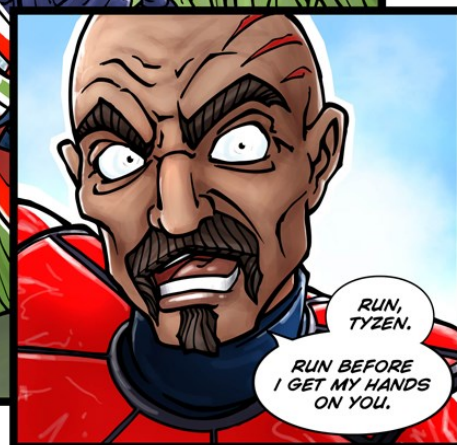
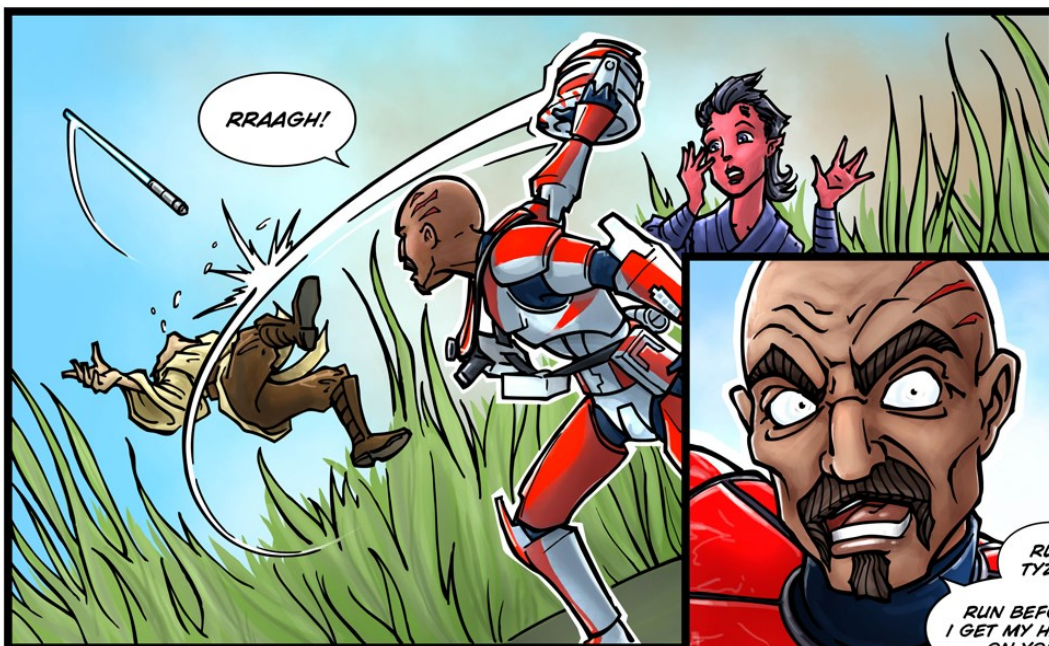


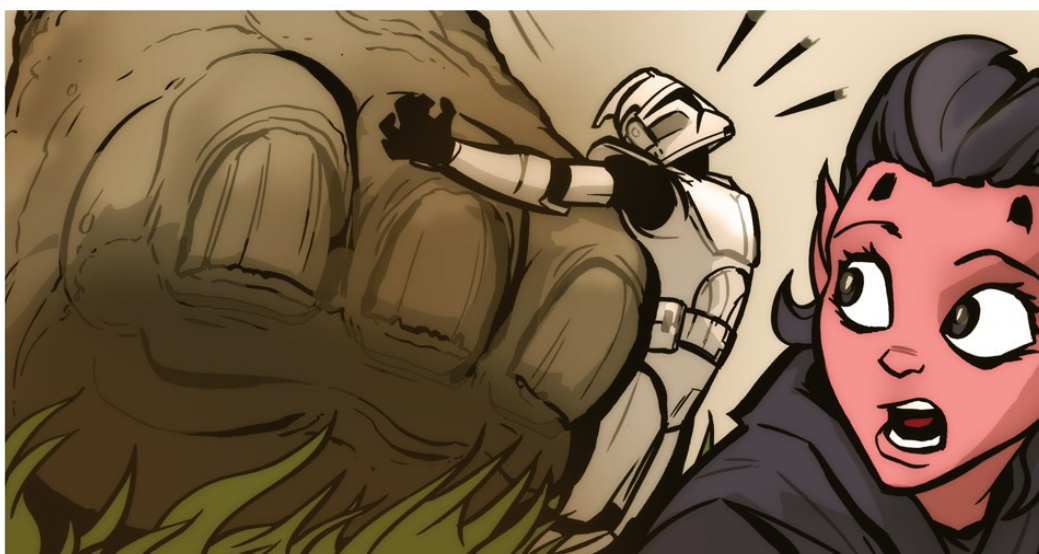


TYZEN!
TYZEN,
COME IN. BLAST,
NOTHING.

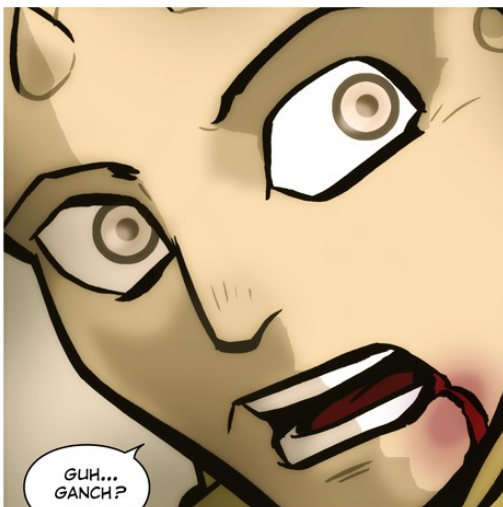
GOOD TO
SEE A LITTLE CONCERN
FOR YOUR PADAWAN,
KEELYVINE.

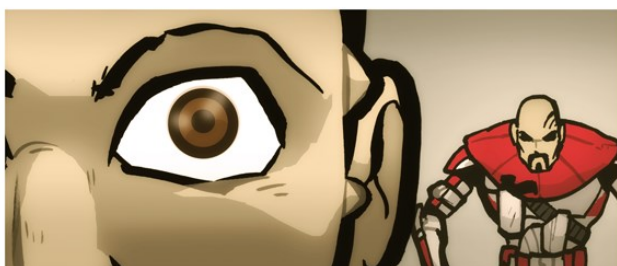
OF COURSE!
IF THE
SEPARATISTS
HAVE MADE A
LANDING, HE
MUST STOP
THEM!

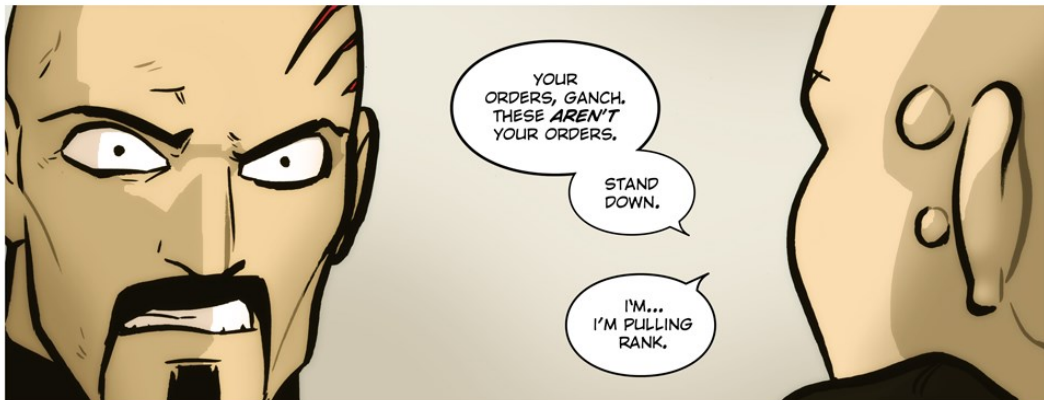














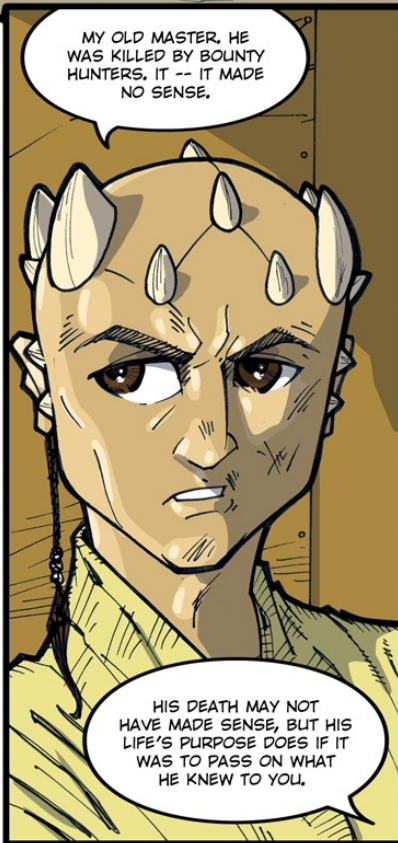


HE'S STABILIZED AND SLEEPING SOUNDLY. HE SHOULD BE OKAY IN HERE. NOTHING WILL TRAMPLE HIM.

TYZEN, WHAT HAPPENED OUT THERE?

I DON'T KNOW. EVERYTHING TURNED... LIKE, *RED*. AND ALL I COULD FEEL WAS WHAT I FELT WHEN... WHEN, MASTER ROPAL DIED.

WHO?



MY OLD MASTER, HE WAS KILLED BY BOUNTY HUNTERS. IT -- IT MADE NO SENSE.

HIS DEATH MAY NOT HAVE MADE SENSE, BUT HIS LIFE'S PURPOSE DOES IF IT WAS TO PASS ON WHAT HE KNEW TO YOU.

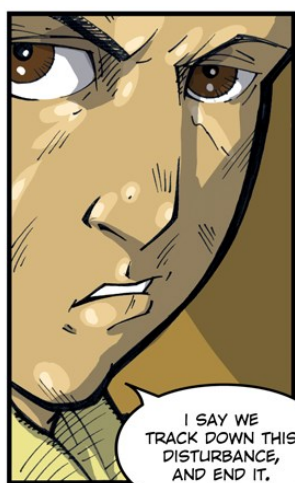


YEAH, YOU'RE RIGHT. "THERE IS NO EMOTION. THERE IS PEACE." THAT IS THE WAY OF THE JEDI.

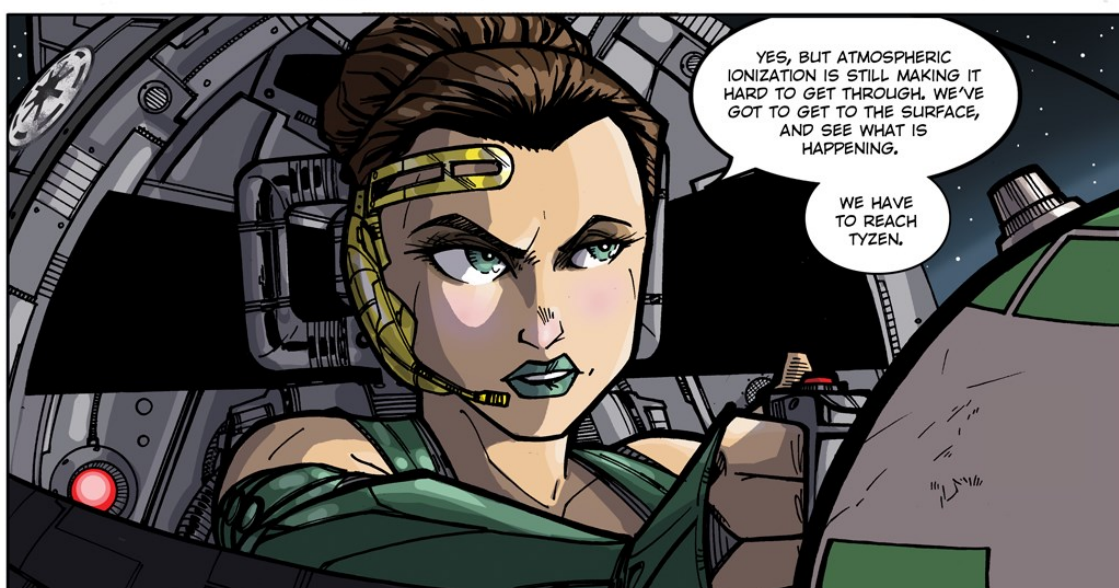
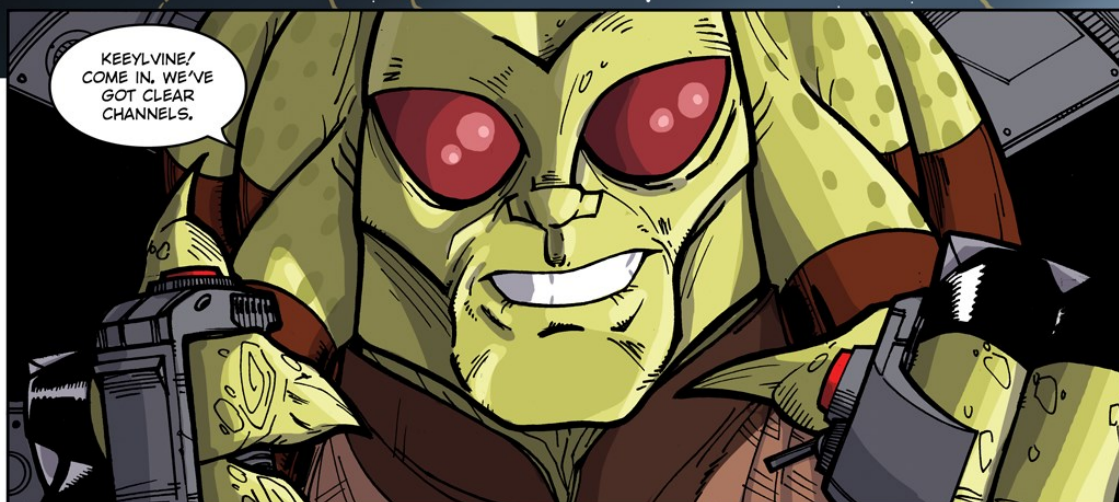


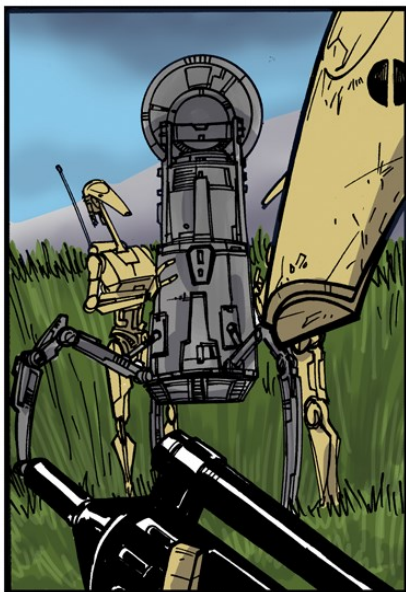
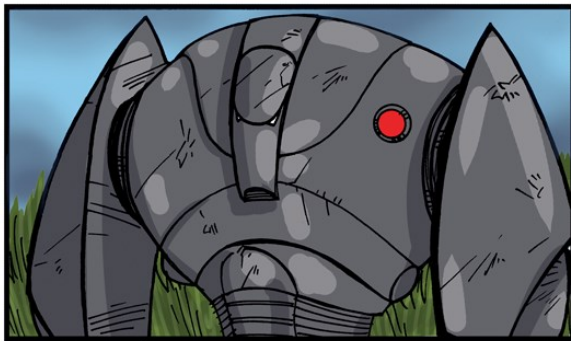
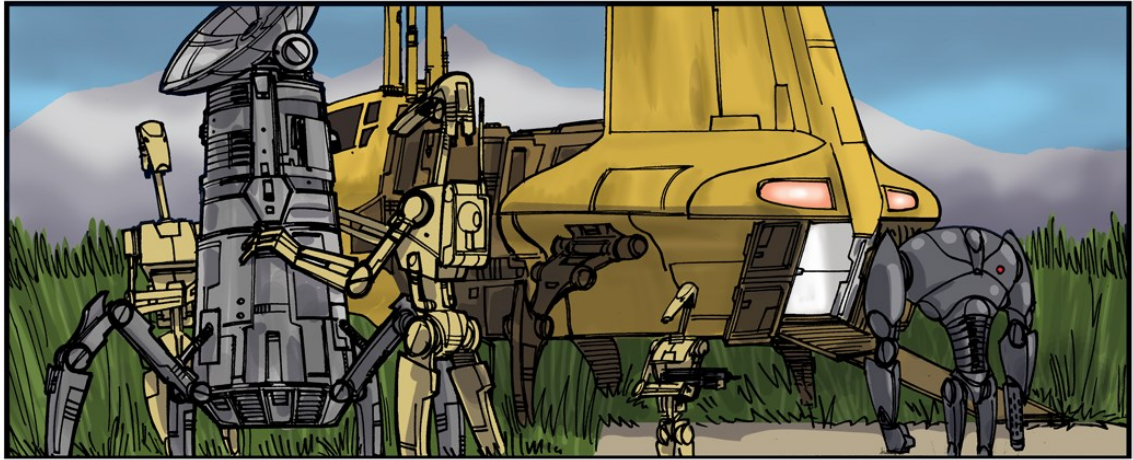
AND PEACE GIVES US CLARITY. THAT WAS THE WAY OF MASTER ROPAL. AND IT'S *CLEAR* TO ME THAT THE SEPARATISTS DID THIS. THEY... *DID* SOMETHING TO THIS PLANET.

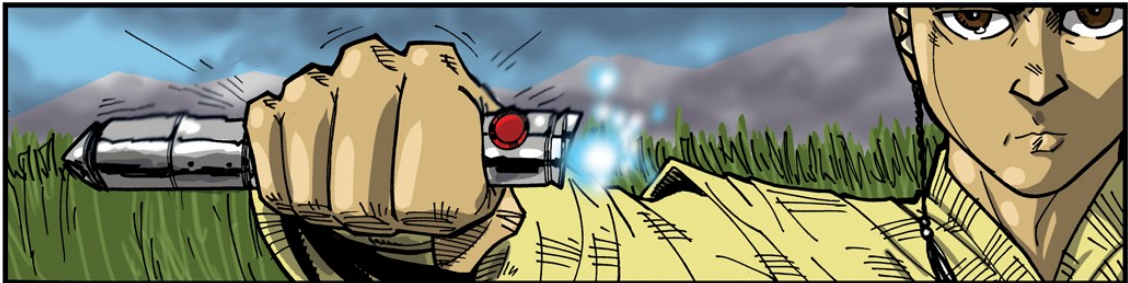
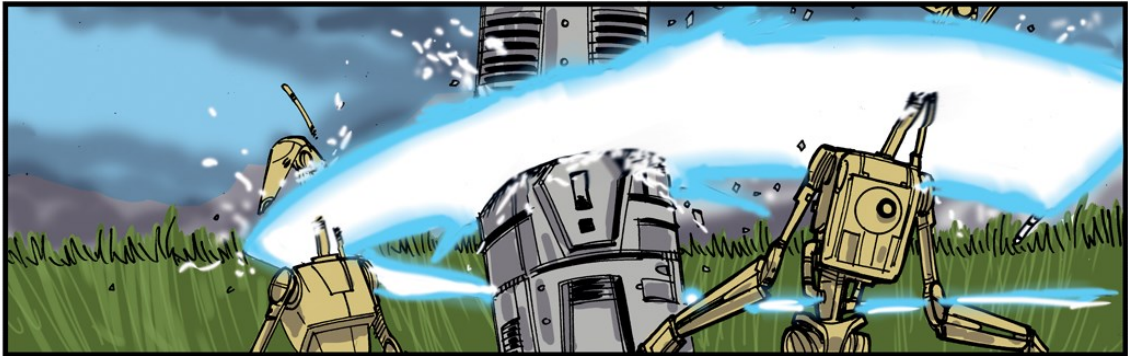
WHAT DO YOU THINK?



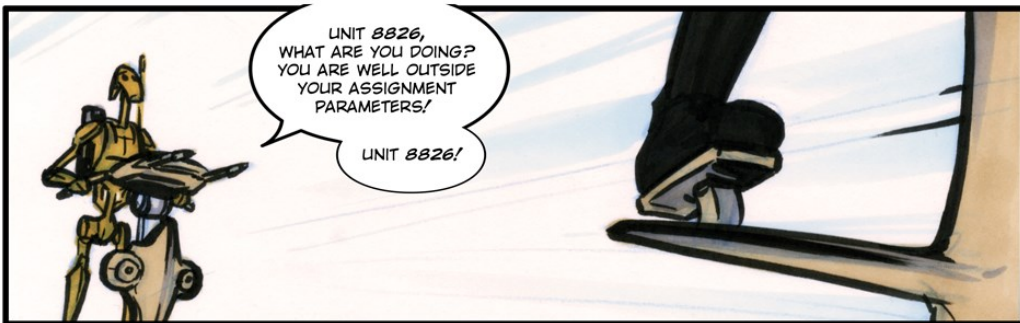
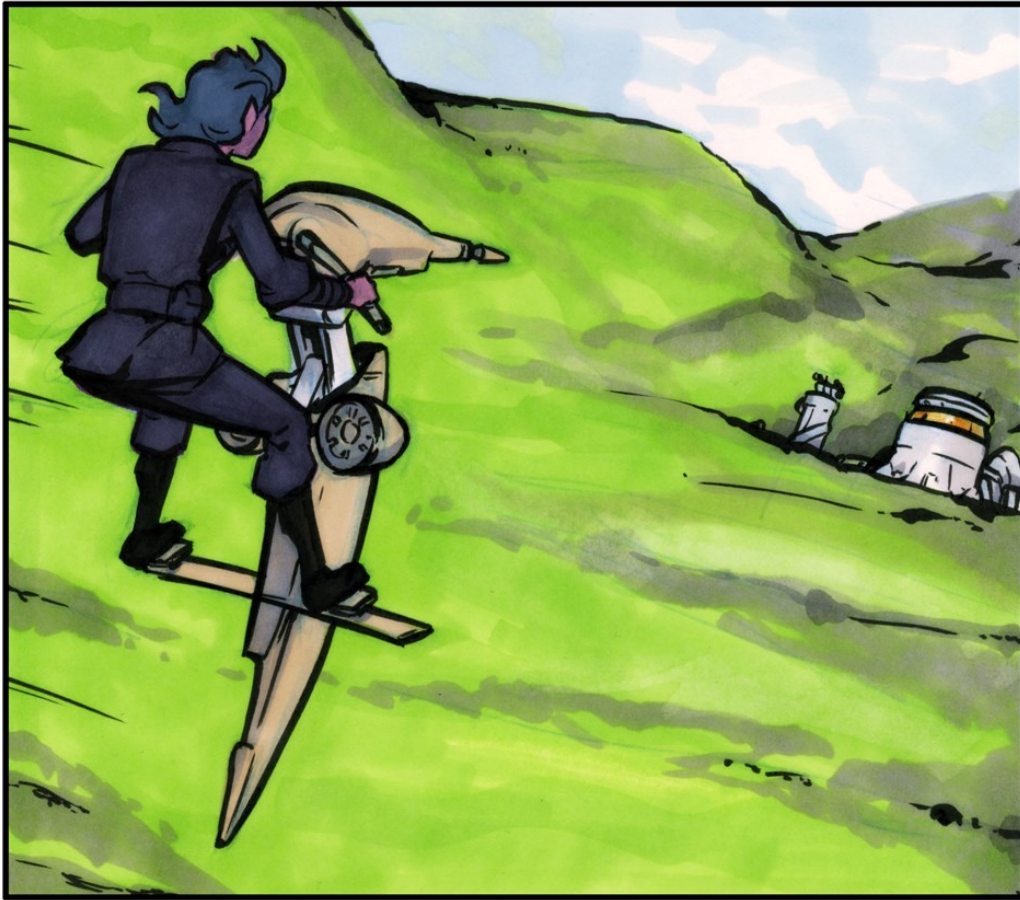
I SAY WE TRACK DOWN THIS DISTURBANCE, AND END IT.



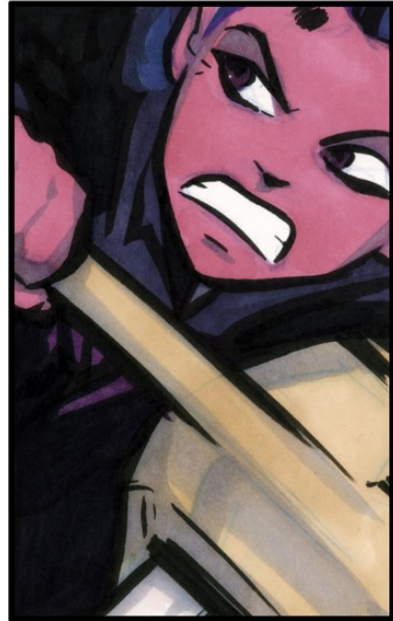


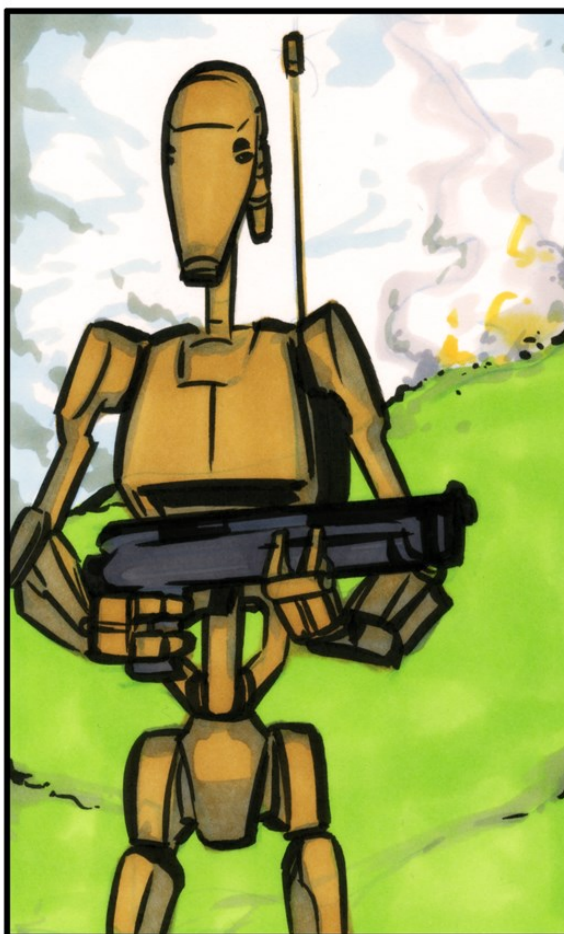




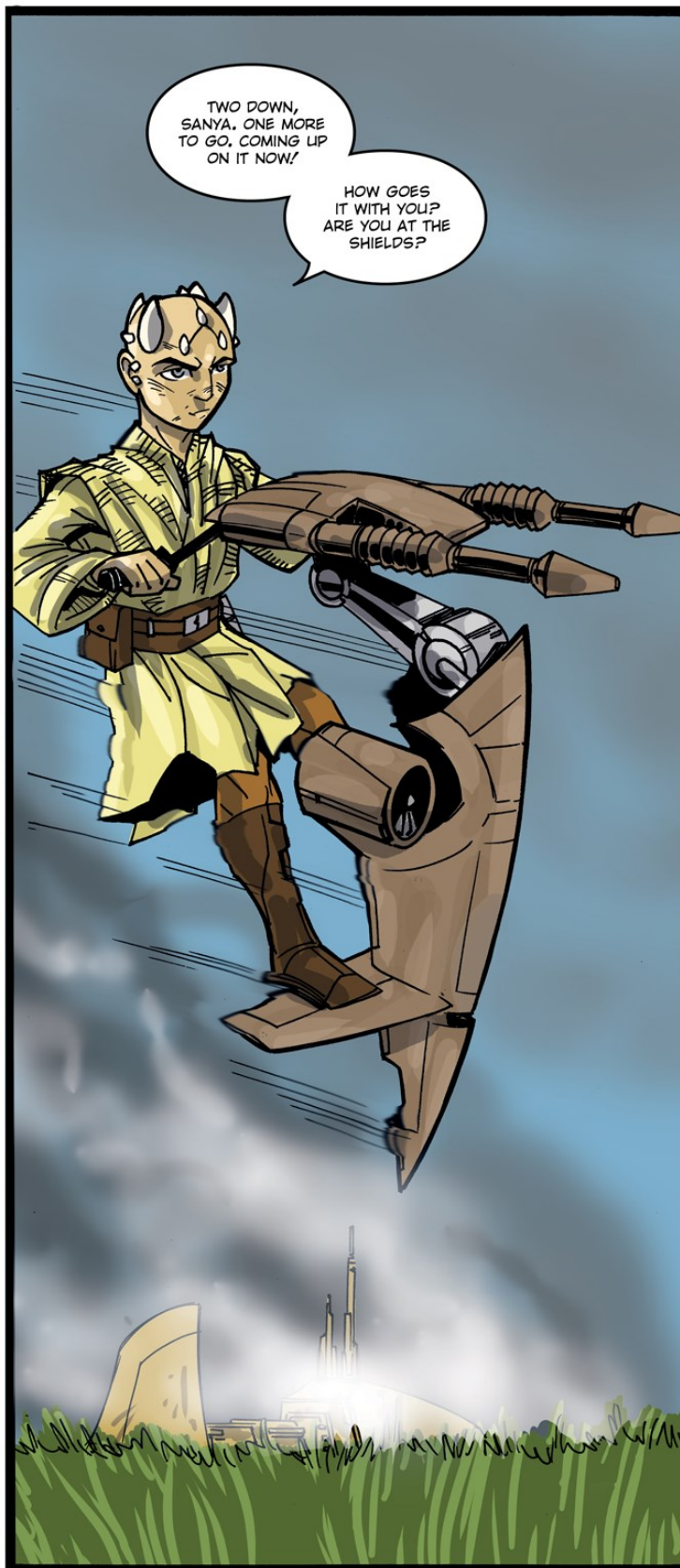






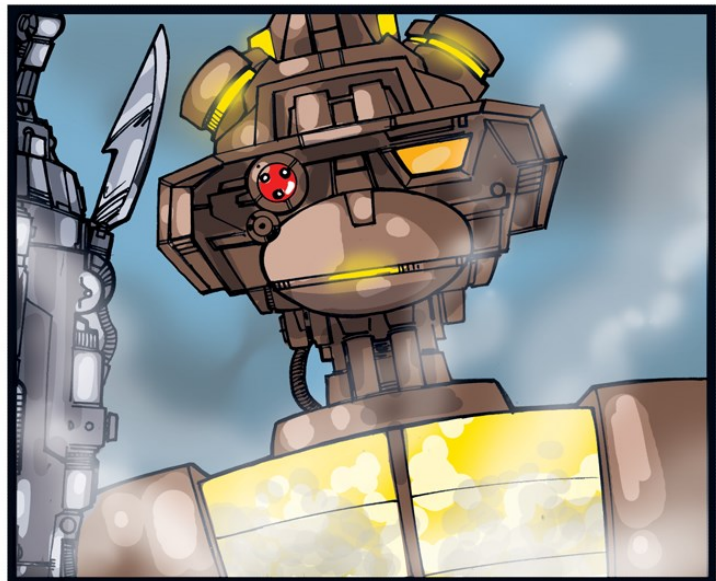
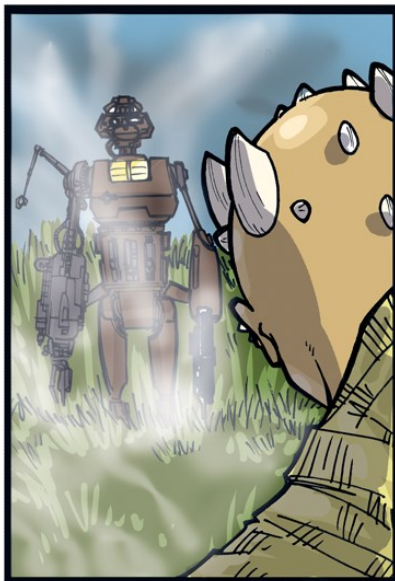


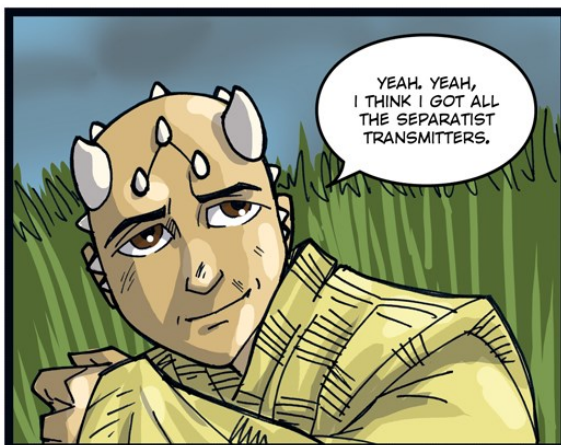
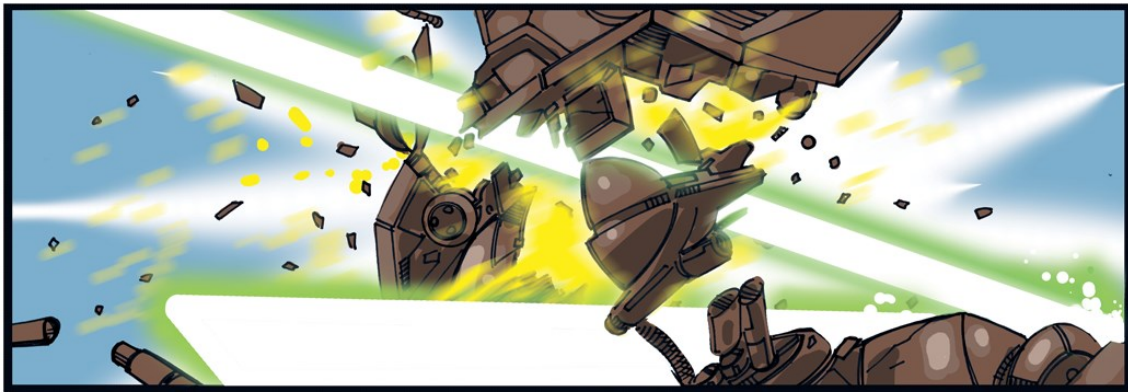


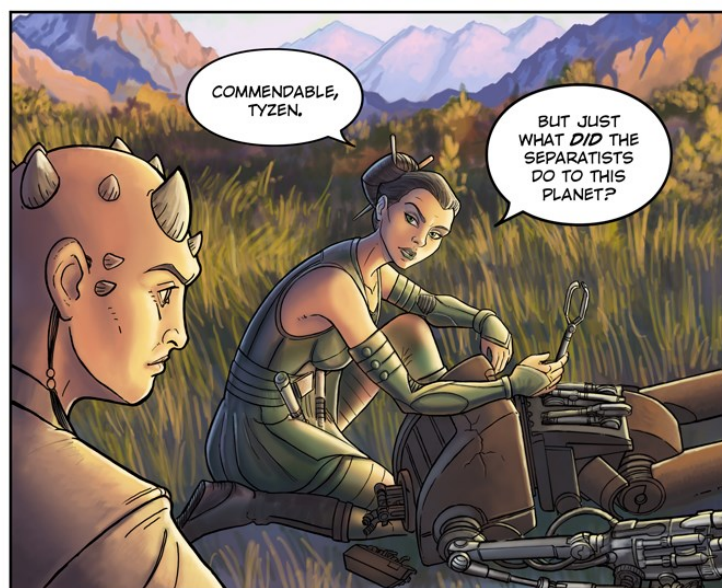
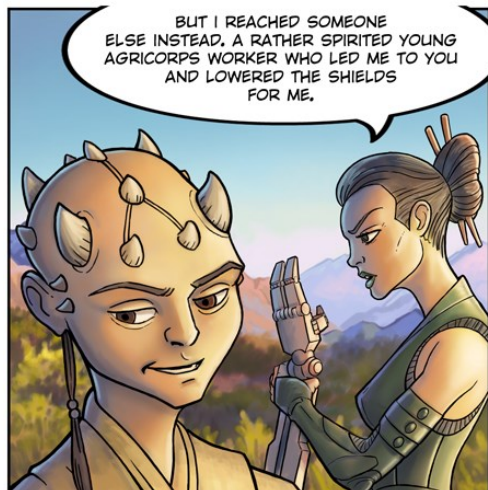














WE ARE RUNNING HEALTH CHECKS ON THE WORKERS AND THE CLONES. THE EFFECT WAS VERY LOCALIZED AND TEMPORARY.

GOOD, TYZEN, WHEN GANCH IS GIVEN A CLEAN BILL OF HEALTH, PUT HIM IN CHARGE OF A FORCE TO TRACK AND ROUND UP ANY WAYWARD HERD ANIMALS.

YES, MASTER. HE'LL LIKE THAT.

SANYA, I COMMEND YOU ON YOUR SERVICE TO THE REPUBLIC.

THANK YOU, MASTER JEDI, THE SHIELDS APPEAR TO BE SECURE.

THE CONTROL ROOM IS A MESS, BUT ENOUGH WORKS TO KEEP US PROTECTED.

THERE'S THE LIEGE NOW.

YOUR HONOR, WE MUST DEBRIEF YOU ON --

YOU AND YOUR COMPANY ARE TO LEAVE IMMEDIATELY.

YOU ARE NO LONGER WELCOME ON UKIO!







DANGER!

MYSTERY INFECTION ON GEONOSIS



**CORUSCANT HEALTH ADMINISTRATION
URGES CAUTION FOR ALL INTER-PLANETARY TRAVEL**

**BE ALERT FOR THE FOLLOWING SYMPTOMS, SOME OR ALL
OF WHICH HAVE BEEN OBSERVED IN THE INFECTED:**

- Speaking in strange dialects or languages
- Frantic avoidance of cold temperatures
- Erratic or irrational behavior
- Unexplained aggression



Brought to you by the Galactic Senate

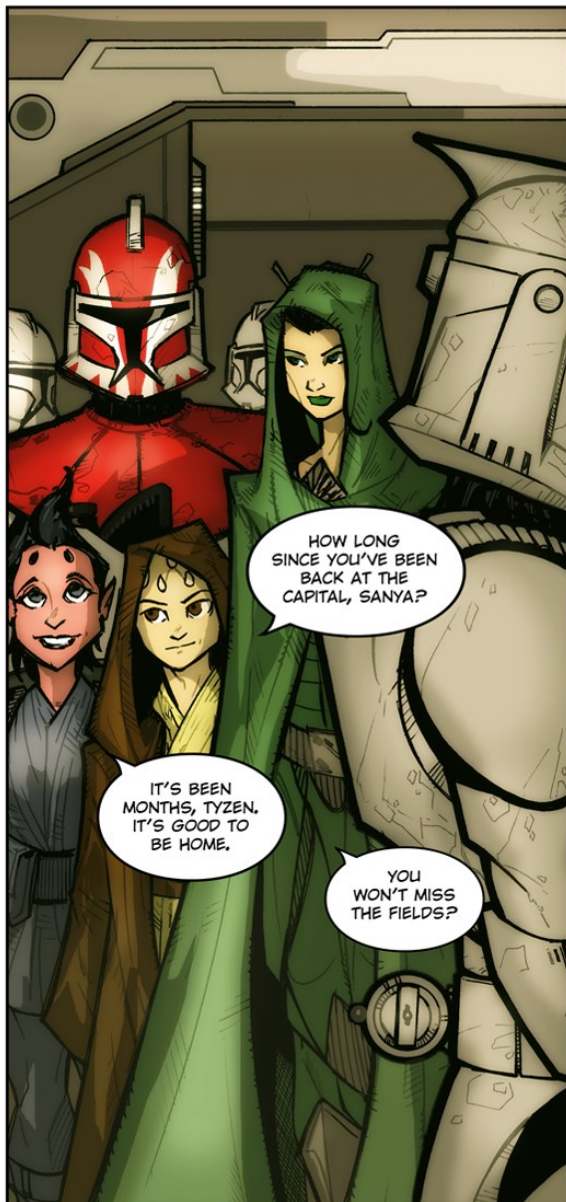
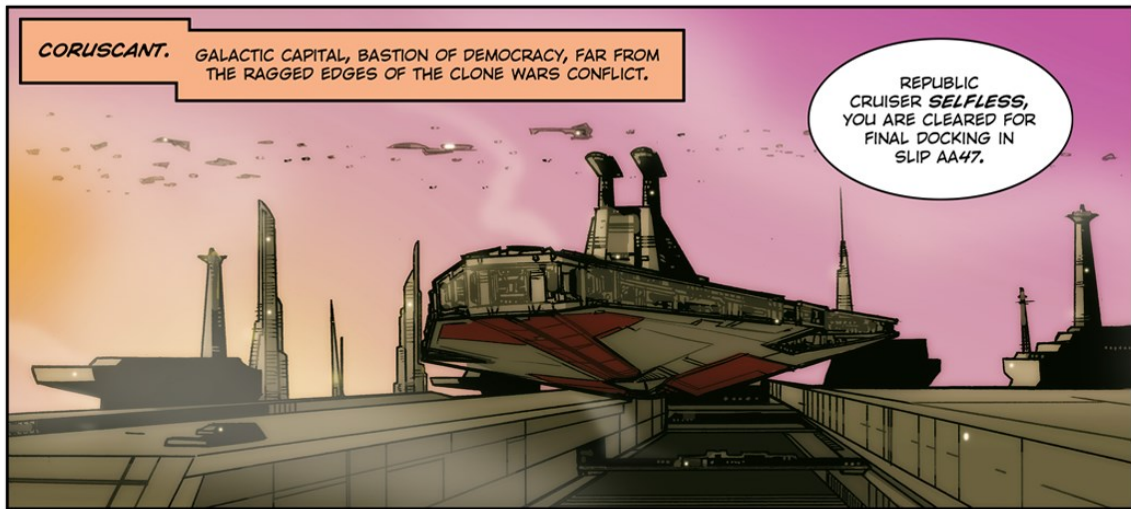


Approved by the Coruscant Health Administration

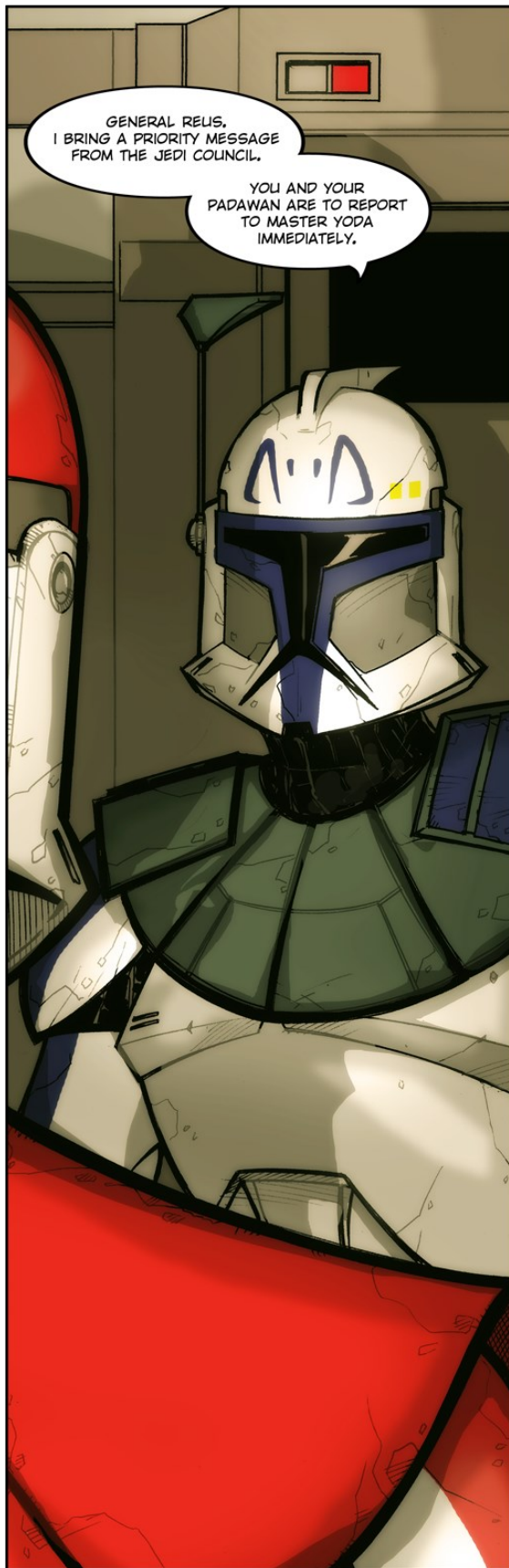
STAR WARSTM THE CLONE WARS



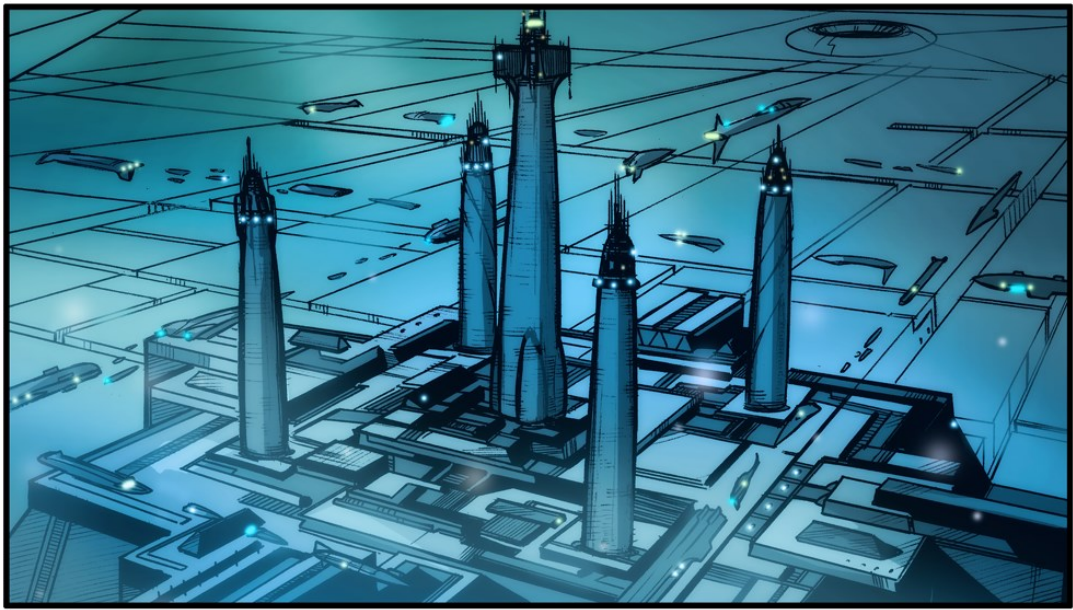
**ALL NEW!
THE VALSEDIAN
OPERATION**



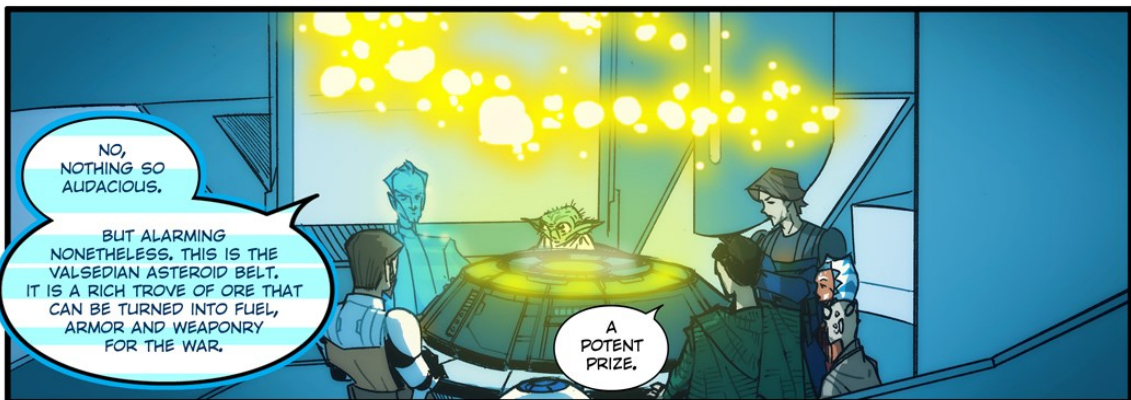


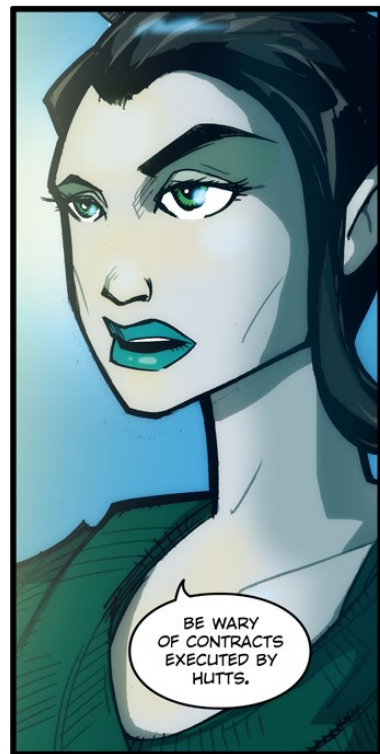
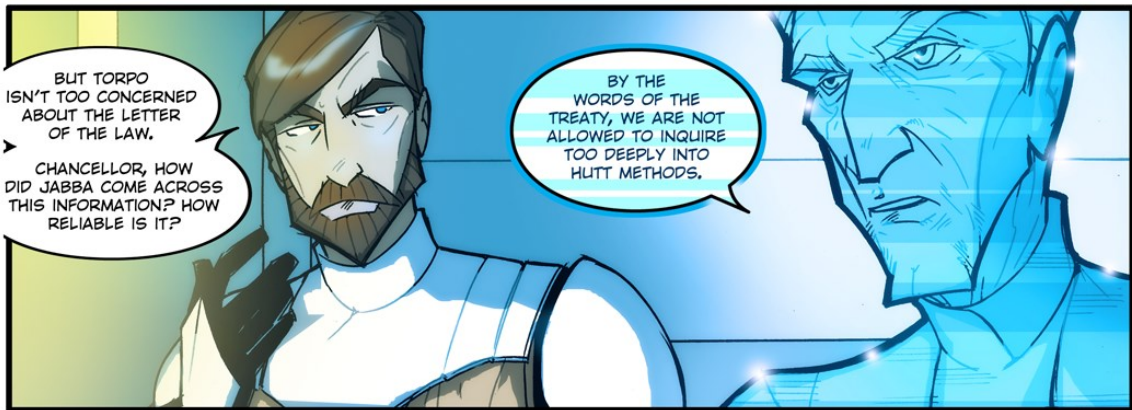


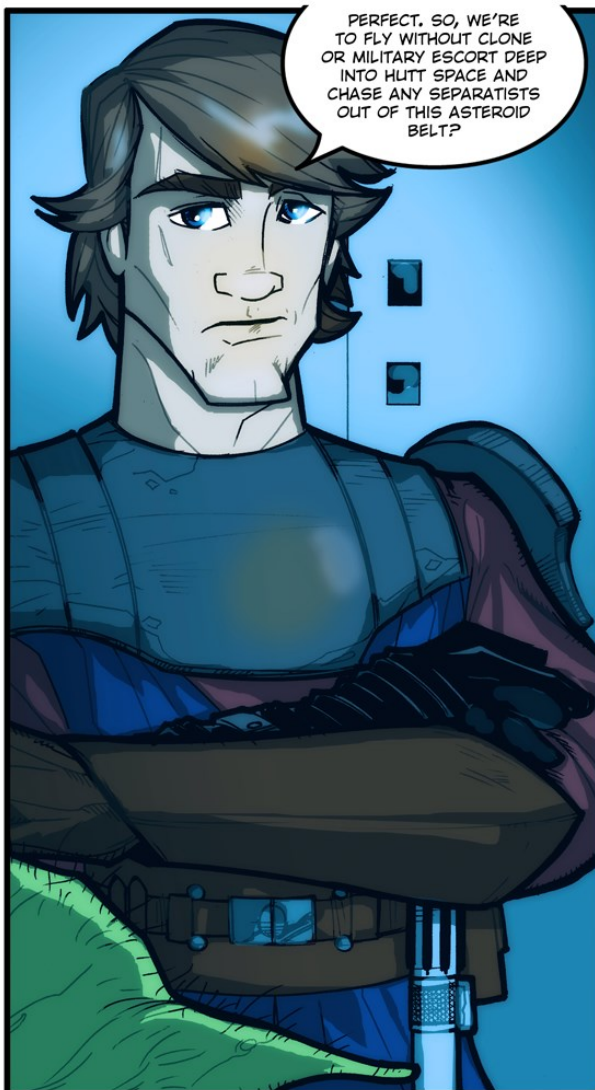












PERFECT. SO, WE'RE TO FLY WITHOUT CLONE OR MILITARY ESCORT DEEP INTO HUTT SPACE AND CHASE ANY SEPARATISTS OUT OF THIS ASTEROID BELT?



FLYING THE FLAG, AS IT WERE.



WE'LL USE THE *TWILIGHT* THEN. IT FITS RIGHT IN WELL IN HUTT SPACE. WE CAN PASS AS JUST A GROUP OF SMUGGLERS.



WITH A JEDI STARFIGHTER TUCKED IN THE HOLD?

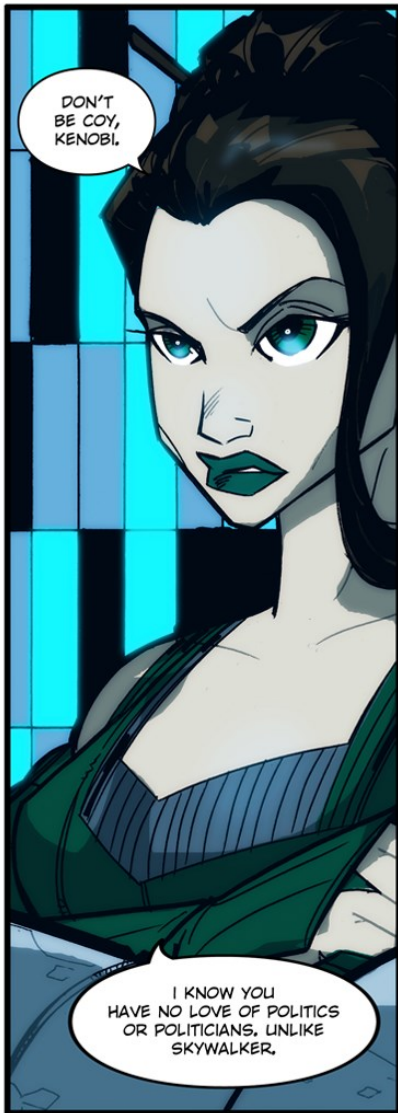
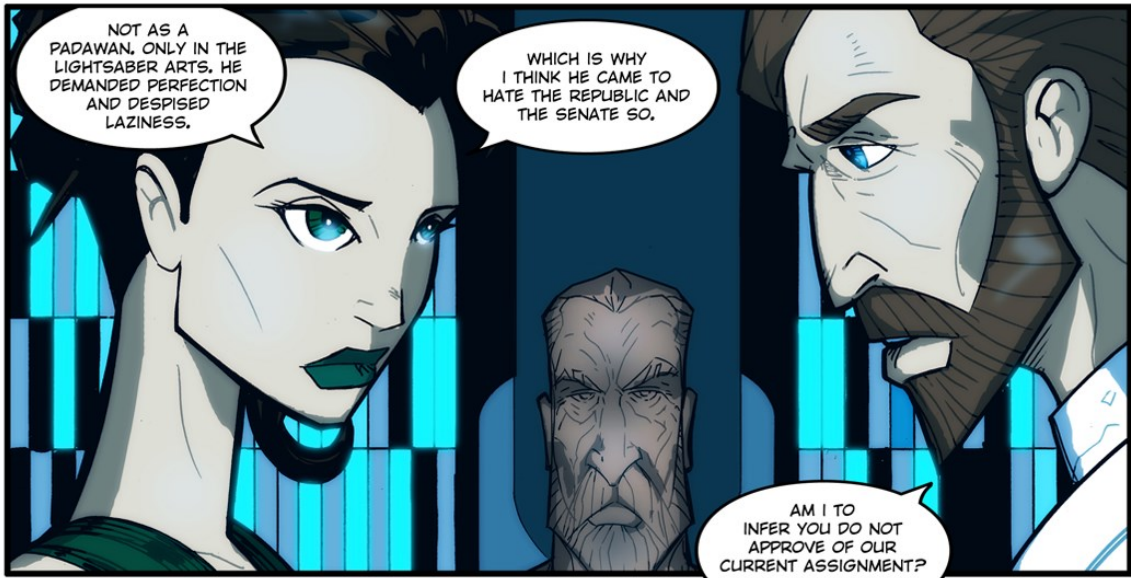
A GROUP OF VERY *LUCKY* SMUGGLERS THEN.

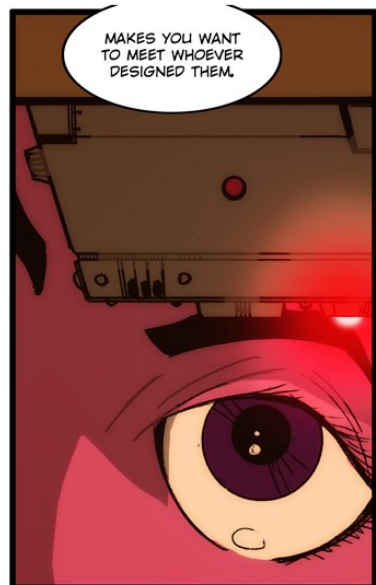
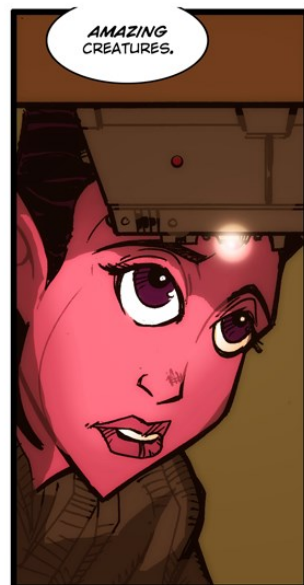




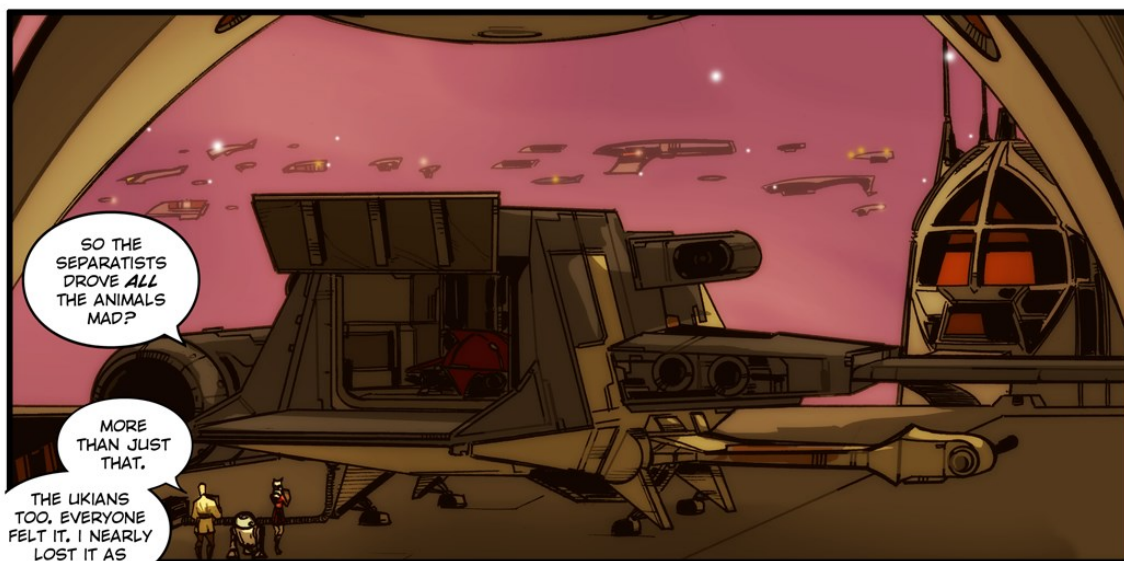


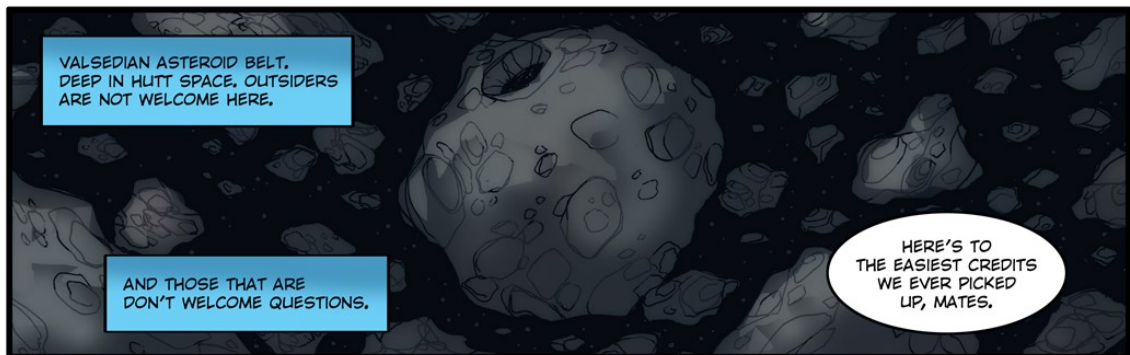


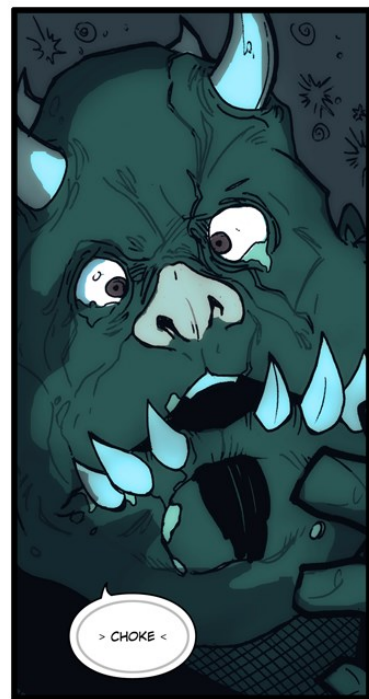


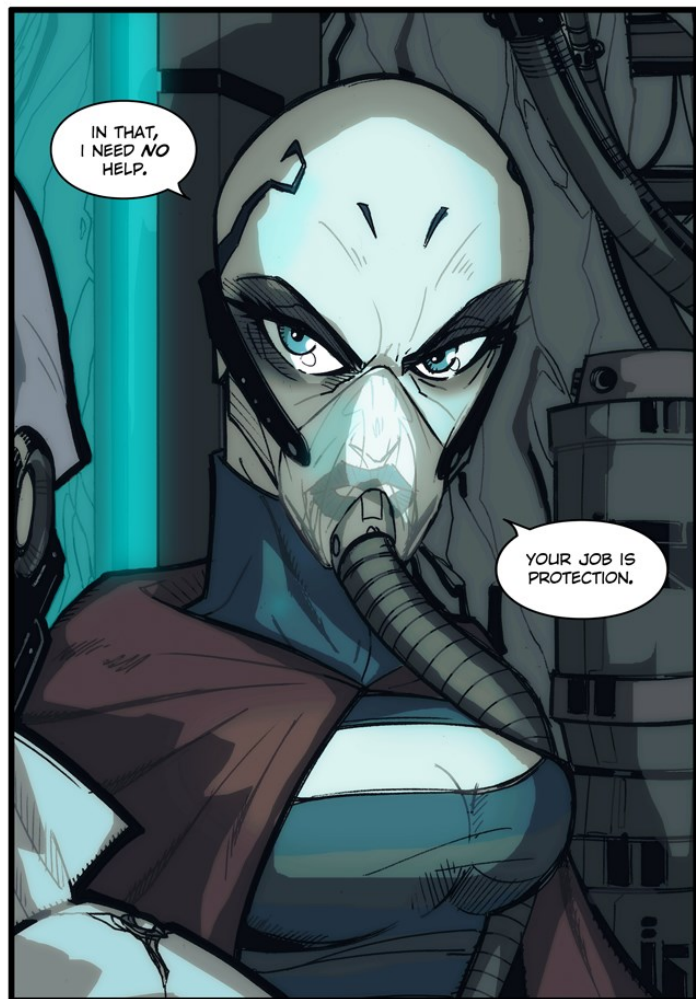


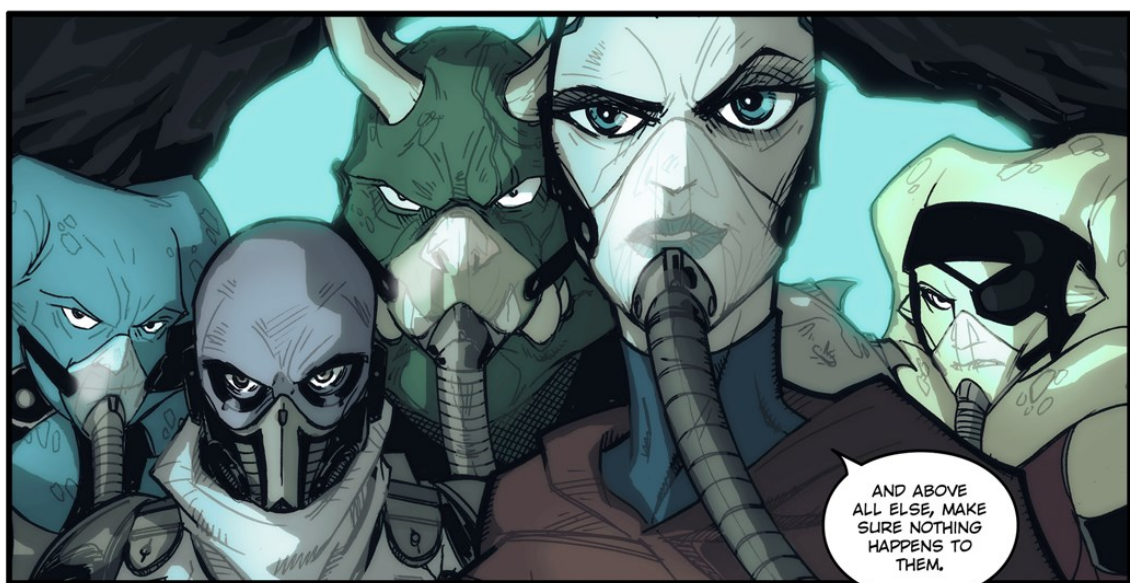


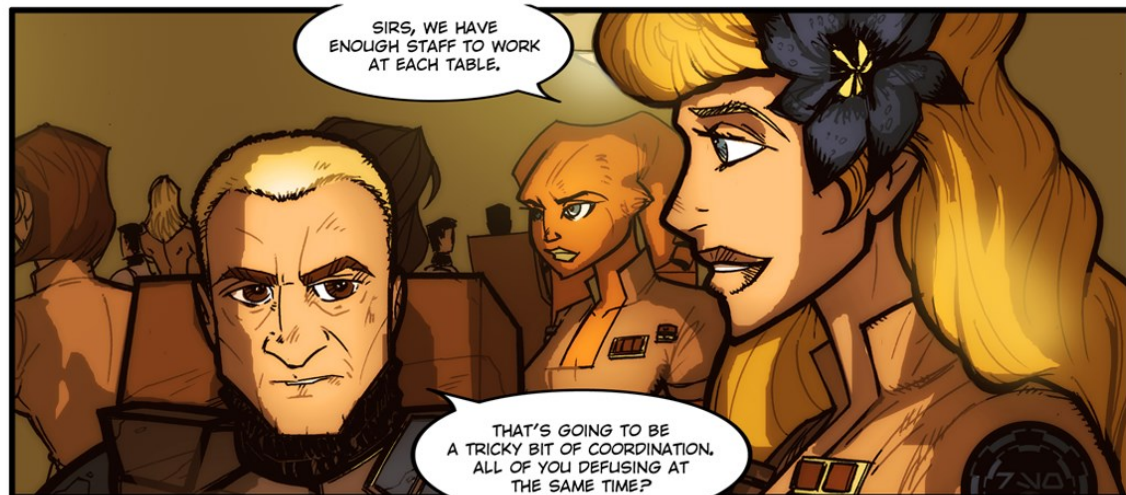


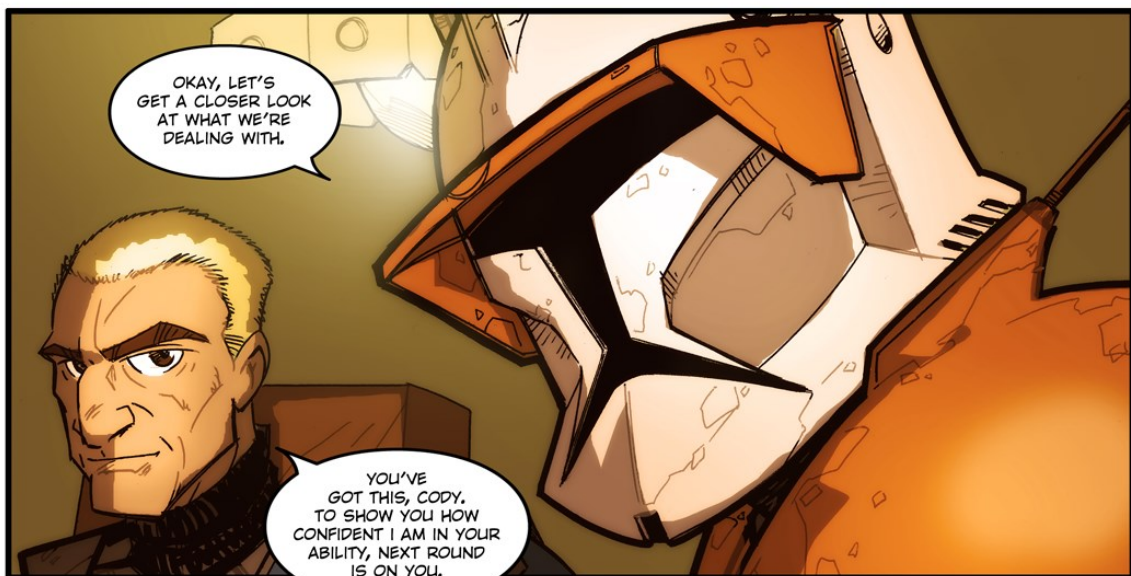


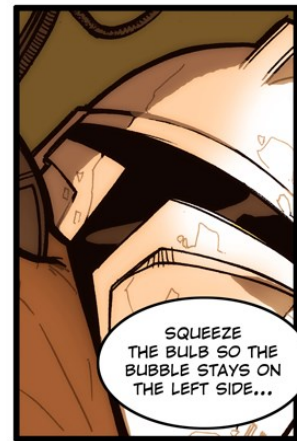
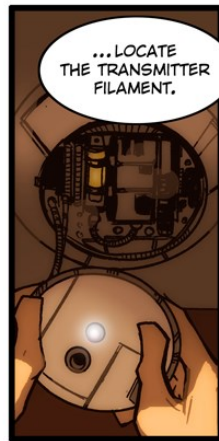












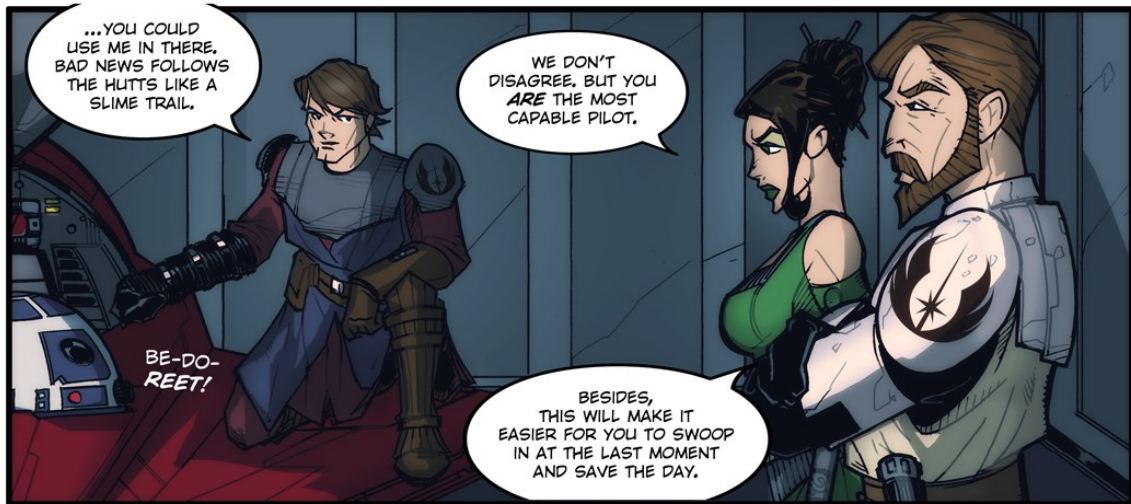






THE VALSEDIAN BELT.

ARTOO'S
ALL SET, OBI-WAN.
THOUGH I CAN'T
SAY EITHER OF US IS
THRILLED AT BEING
BACK UP...



...YOU COULD
USE ME IN THERE.
BAD NEWS FOLLOWS
THE HUTTS LIKE A
SLIME TRAIL.

WE DON'T
DISAGREE, BUT YOU
ARE THE MOST
CAPABLE PILOT.

BE-DO-
REET!

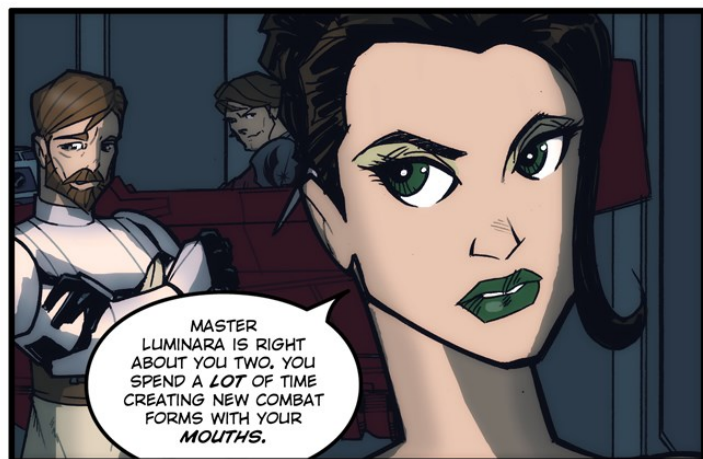
BESIDES,
THIS WILL MAKE IT
EASIER FOR YOU TO SWOOP
IN AT THE LAST MOMENT
AND SAVE THE DAY.



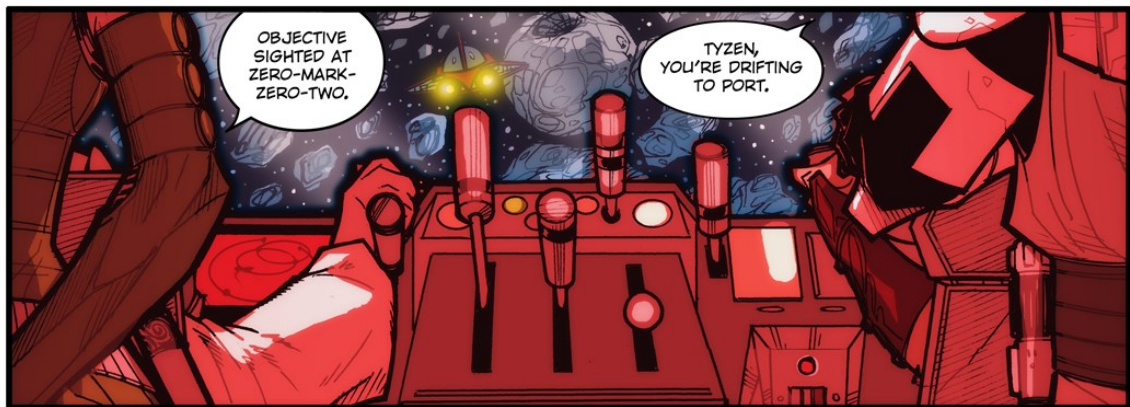
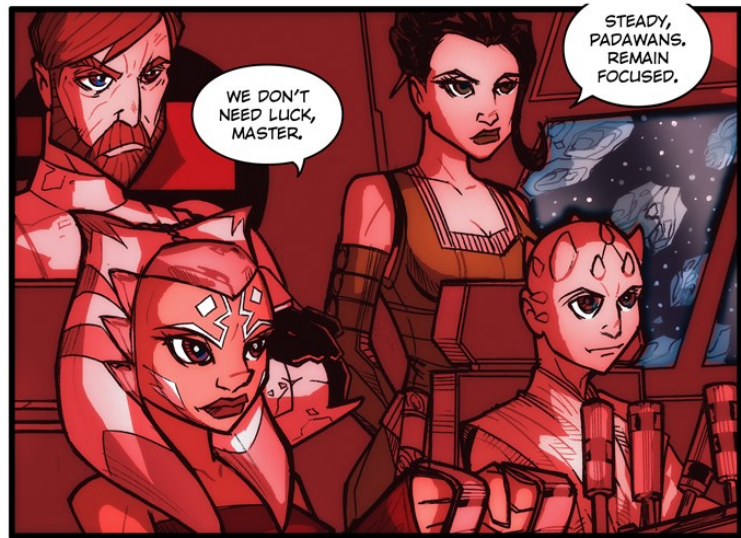
I'LL MAKE
SURE TO WAIT
UNTIL YOU'VE EXHAUSTED
YOURSELF TRYING TO
TALK YOUR WAY OUT
OF YOUR MESS.

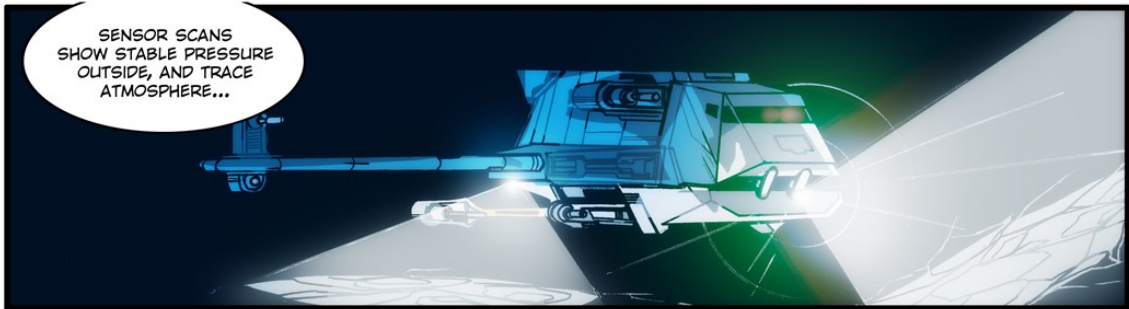


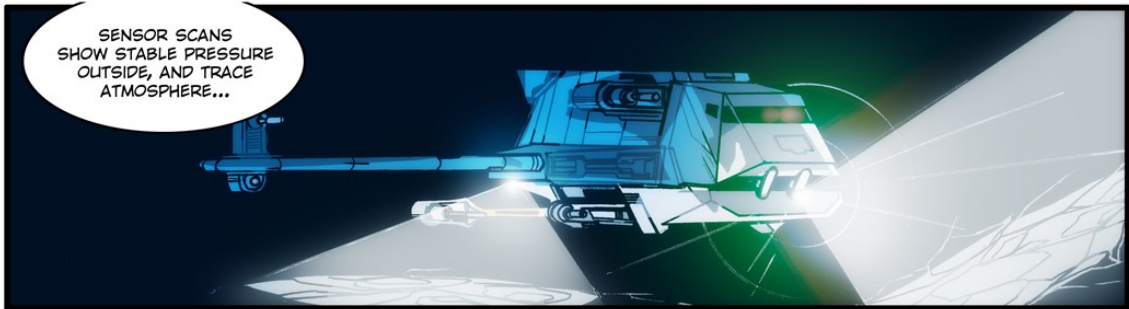
JUST BE
SURE TO LEAVE
ENOUGH ASTEROID
LEFT FOR US TO
STAND ON.



MASTER
LUMINARA IS RIGHT
ABOUT YOU TWO. YOU
SPEND A *LOT* OF TIME
CREATING NEW COMBAT
FORMS WITH YOUR
MOUTHS.

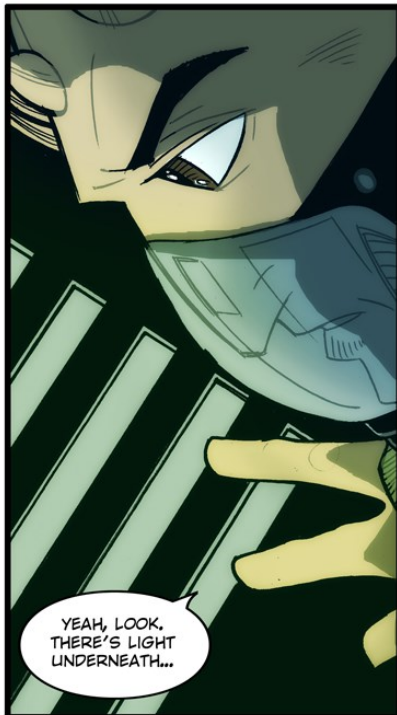
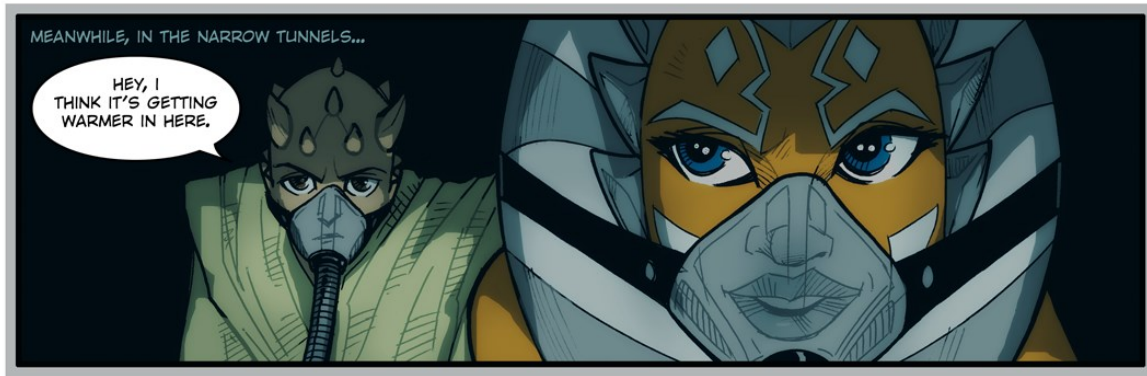
















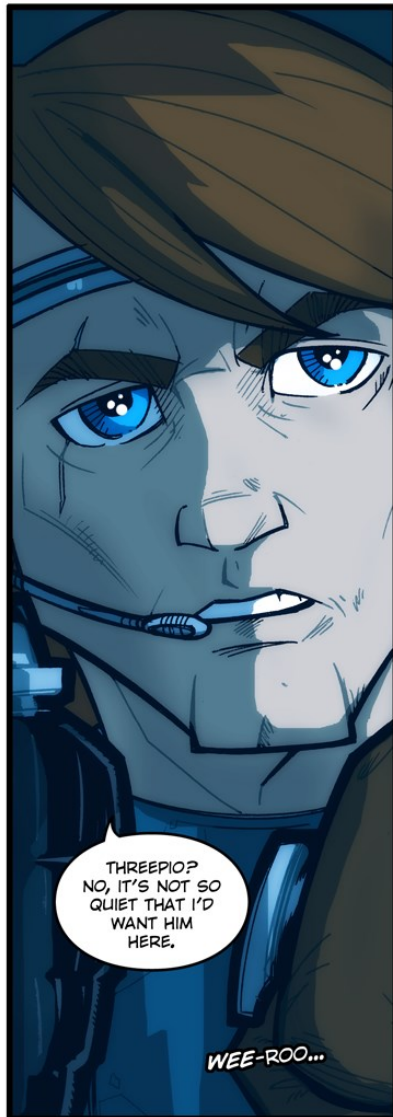


IN THE BELT...

WE-DO-
BEET?

I KNOW,
LITTLE BUDDY. I
DON'T LIKE SITTING
OUT HERE
EITHER.

WE-DIP-A
DEE-BOOP?



THREEPIO?
NO, IT'S NOT SO
QUIET THAT I'D
WANT HIM
HERE.

WEE-ROO...



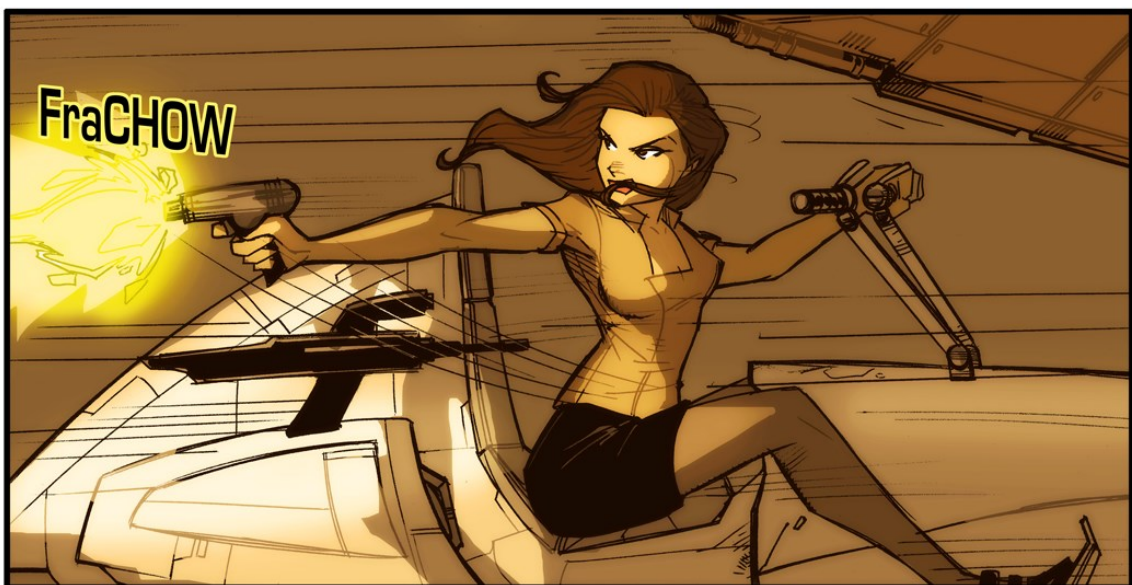
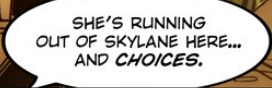
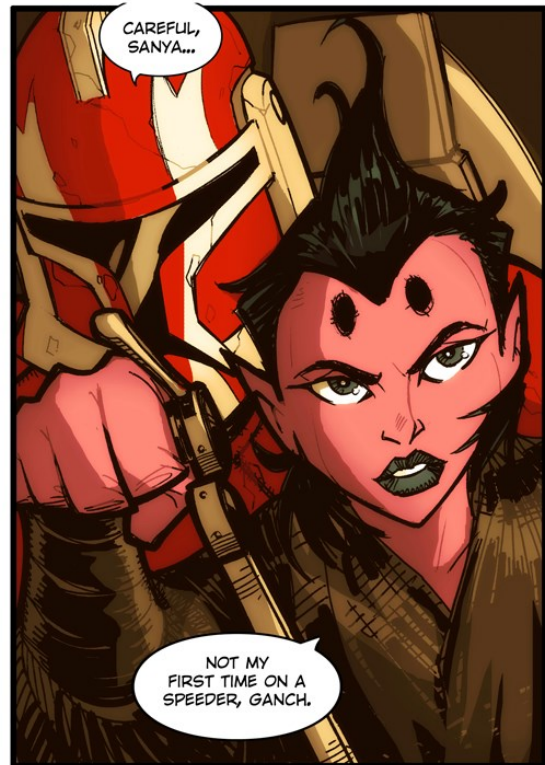
LET'S TAKE
ANOTHER ORBIT.
JUST IN
CASE...

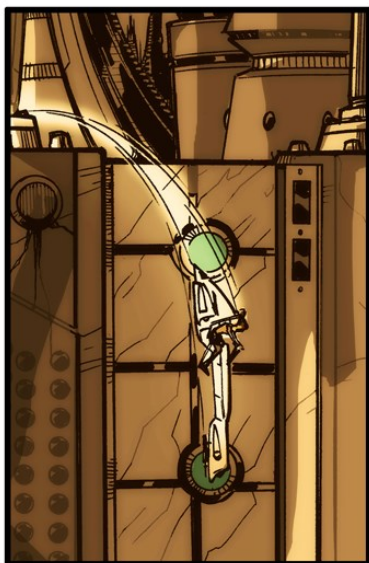
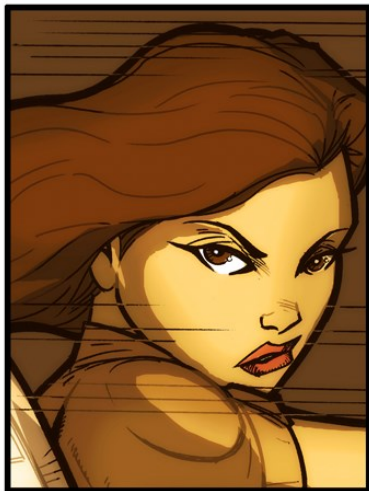
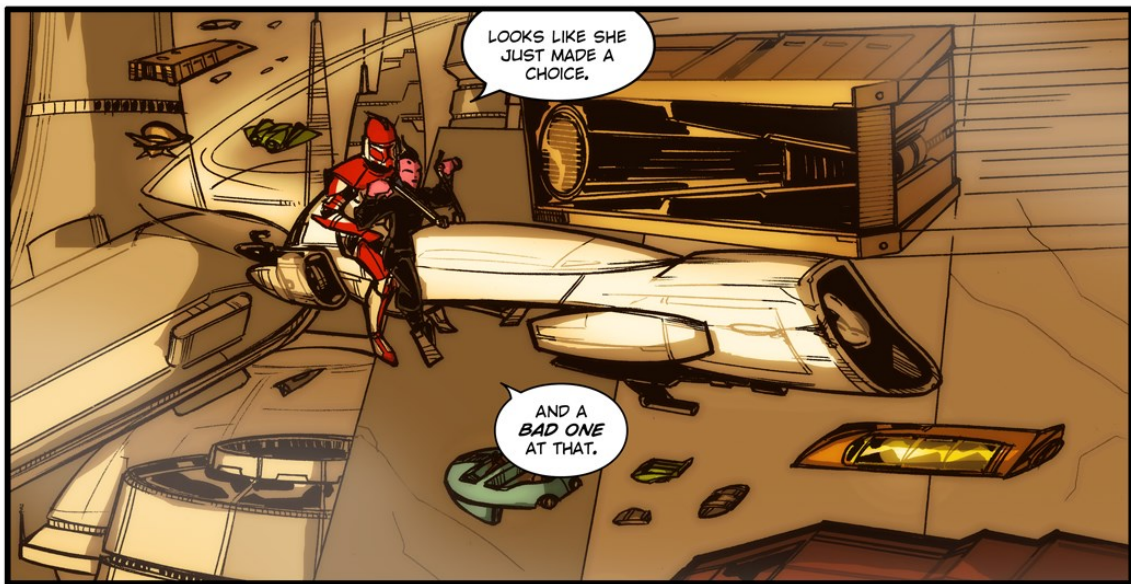
WHEET WHEET
BE-DO-WHEET!



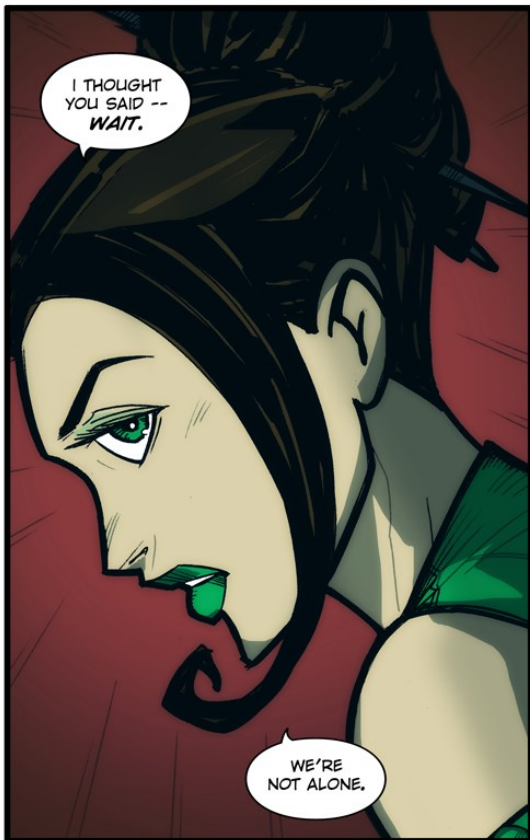
VULTURE
DROIDS!

YOU WANTED
COMPANY, ARTOO?
WE'VE GOT IT!

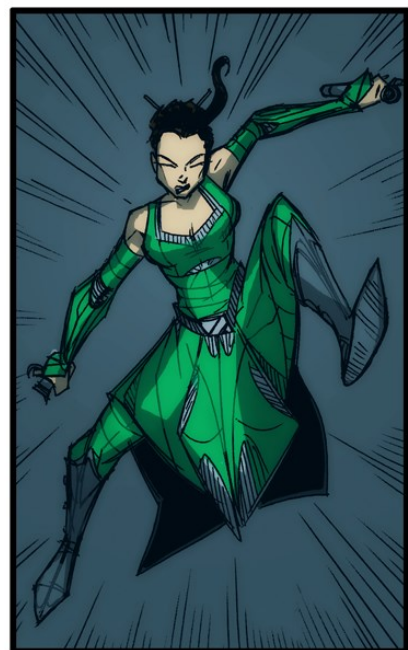
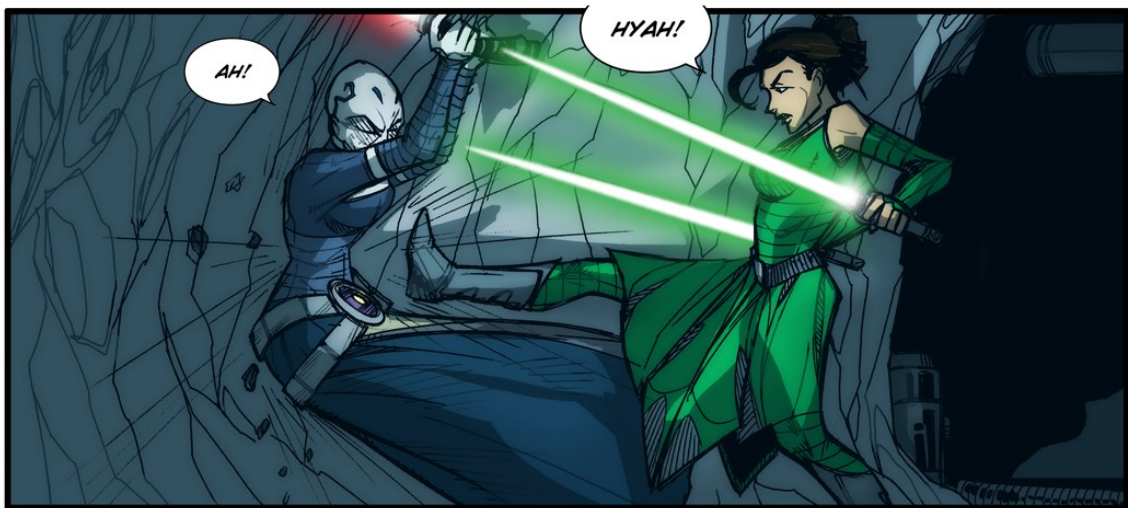


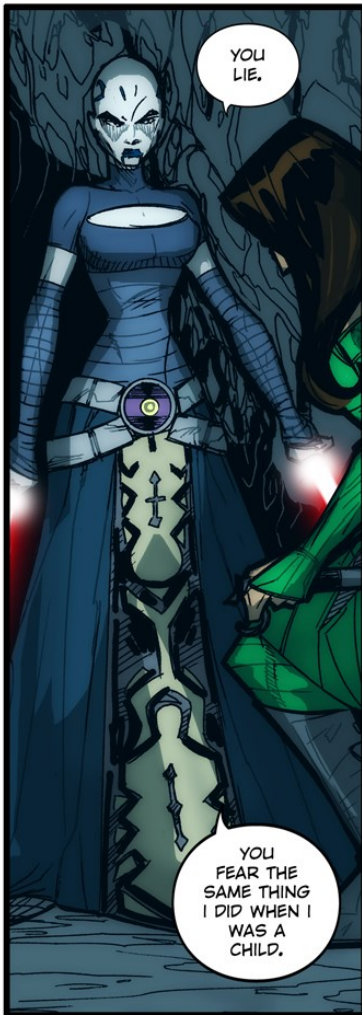


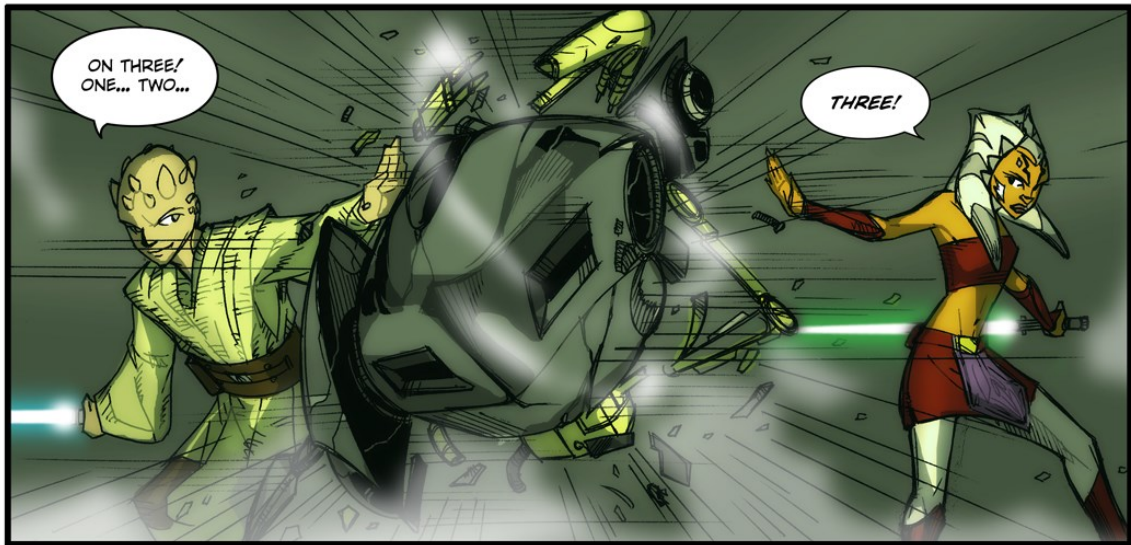






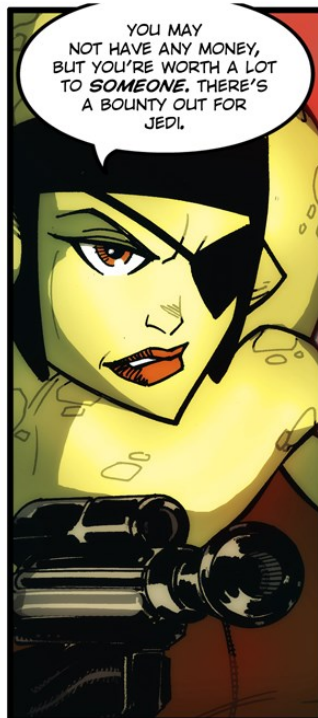
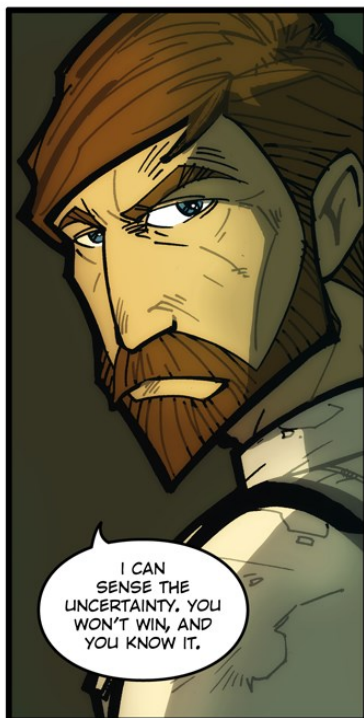




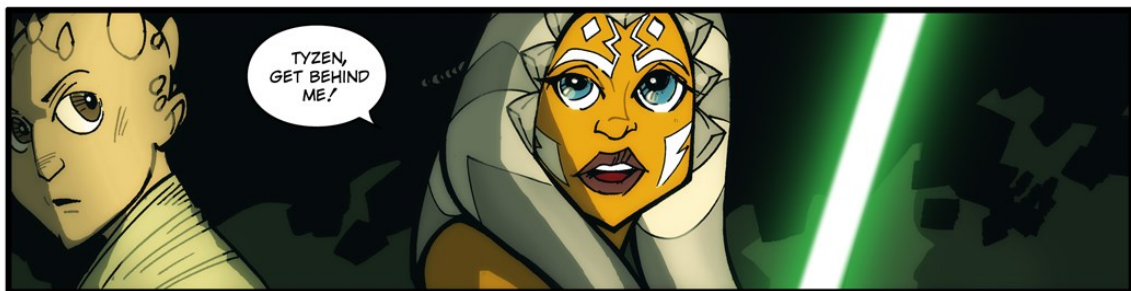


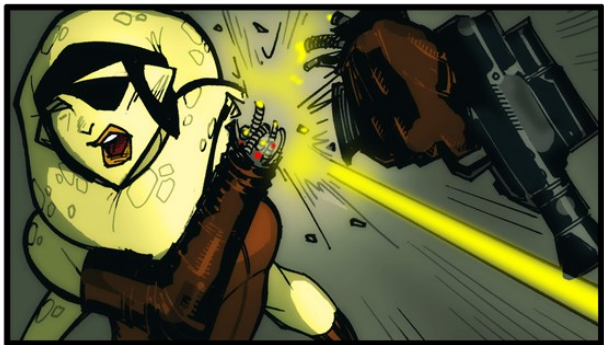








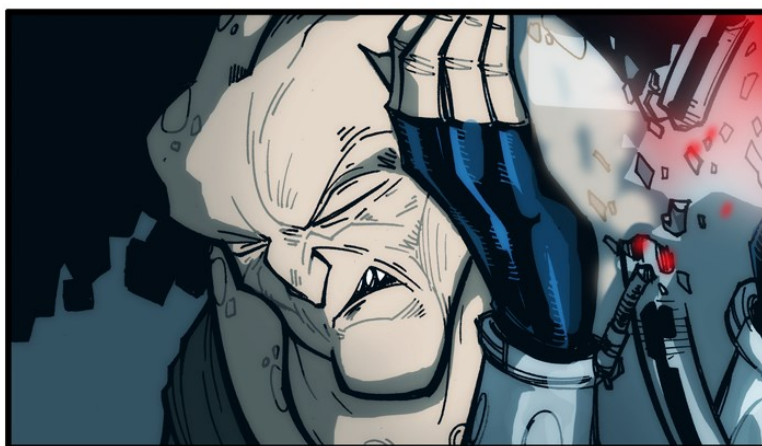
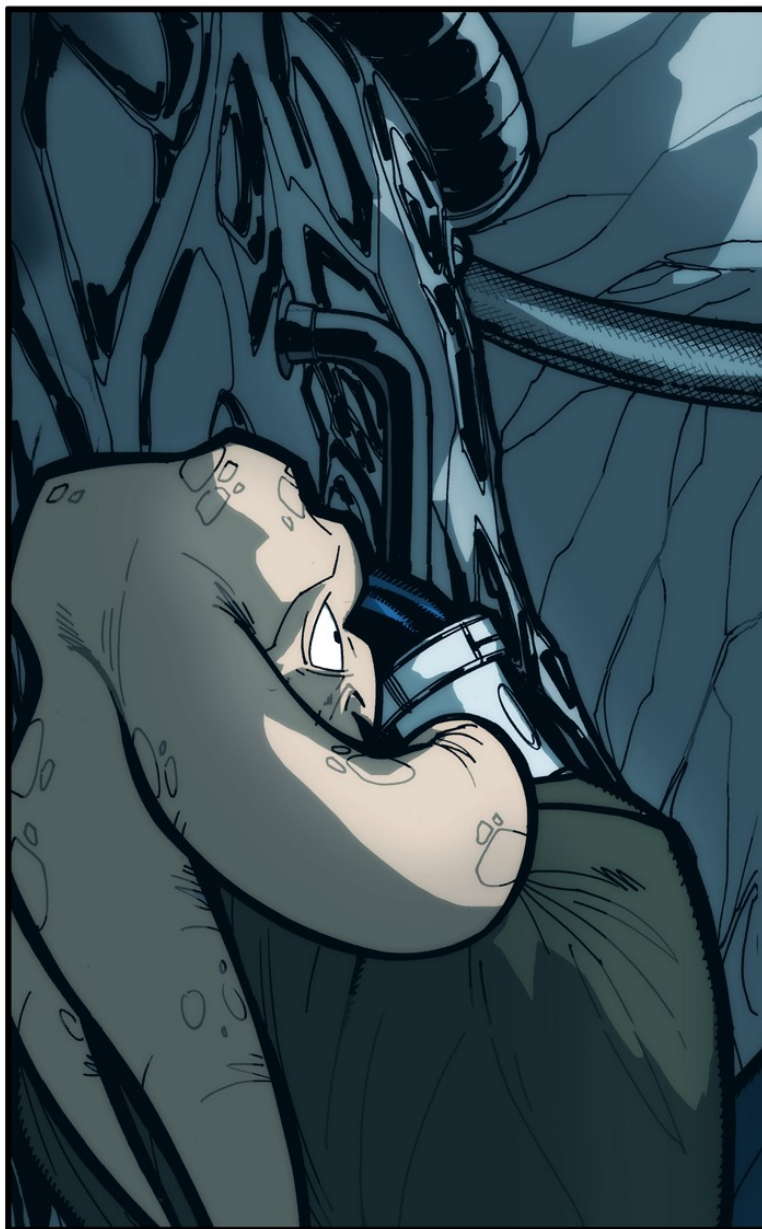
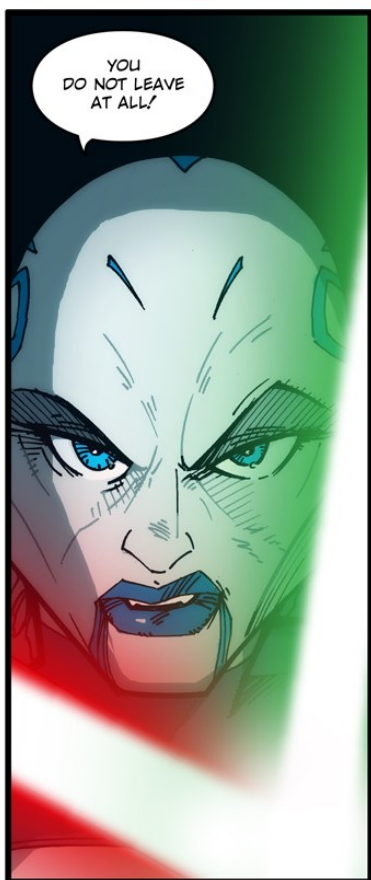
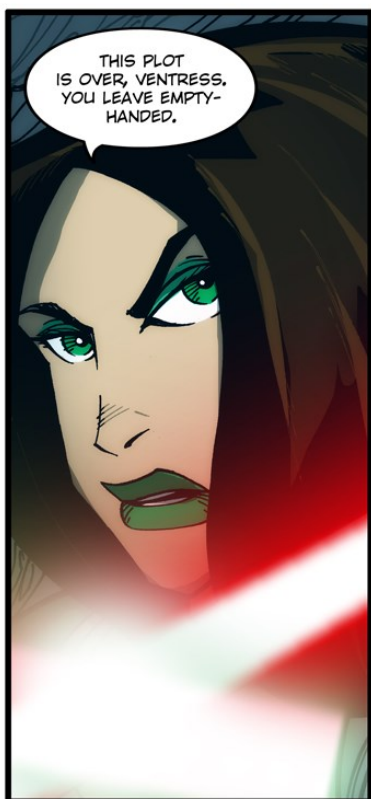


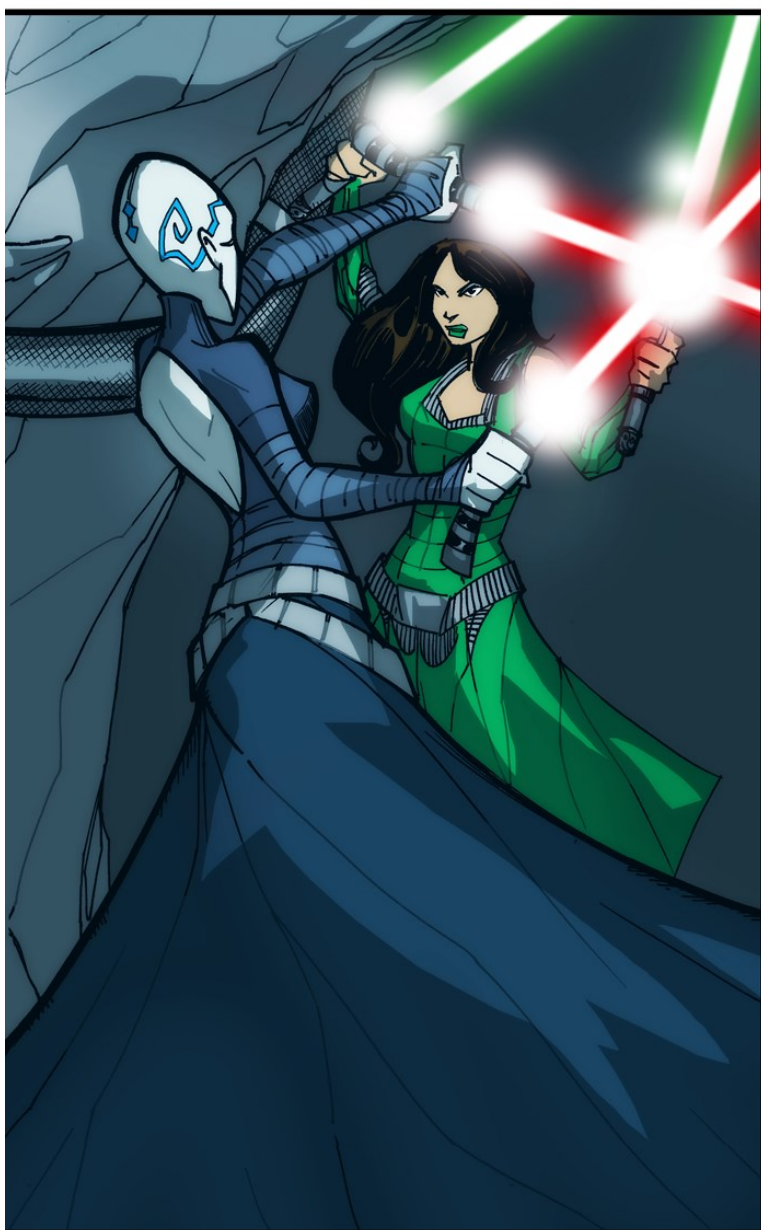


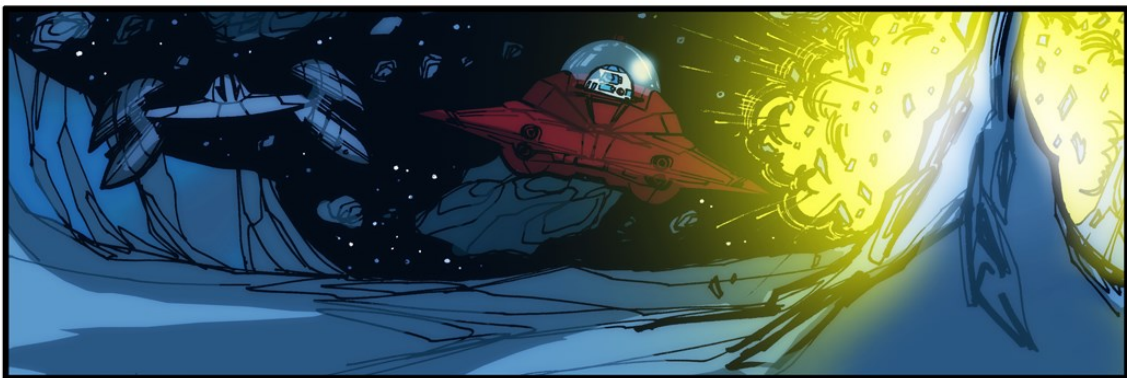
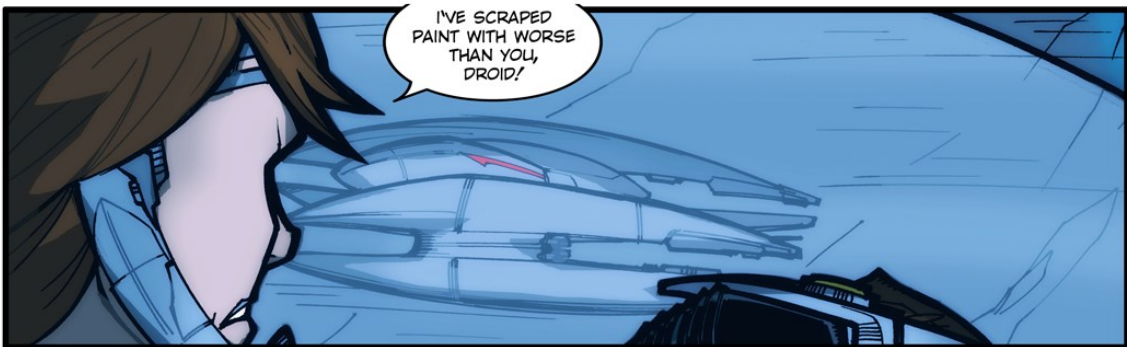
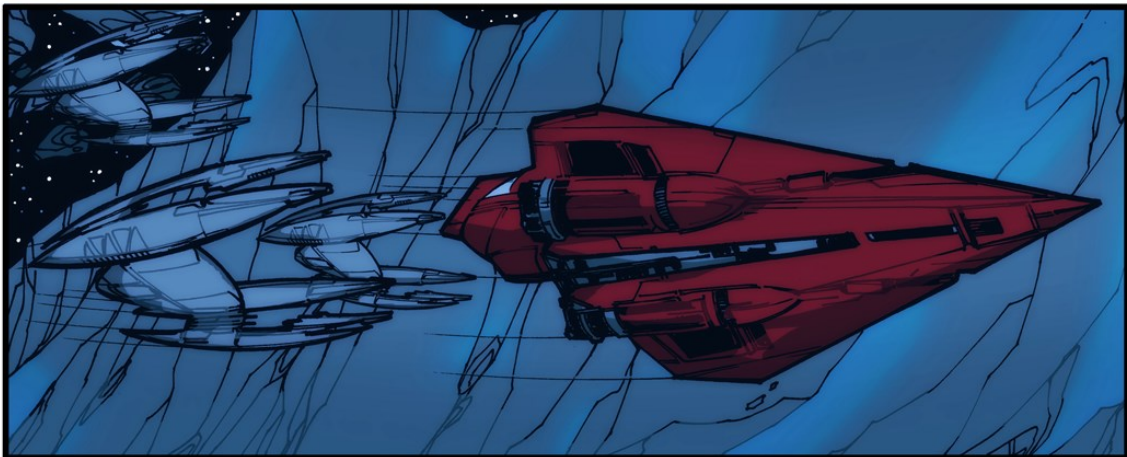


MY MASTER
WANTS THIS SYSTEM,
AND THERE IS NO ONE
WHO CAN REFUSE
HIM.

DOOKU HAS
STILL TO LEARN THAT
THE UNIVERSE DOES
NOT KNEEL AT
HIS WHIM.





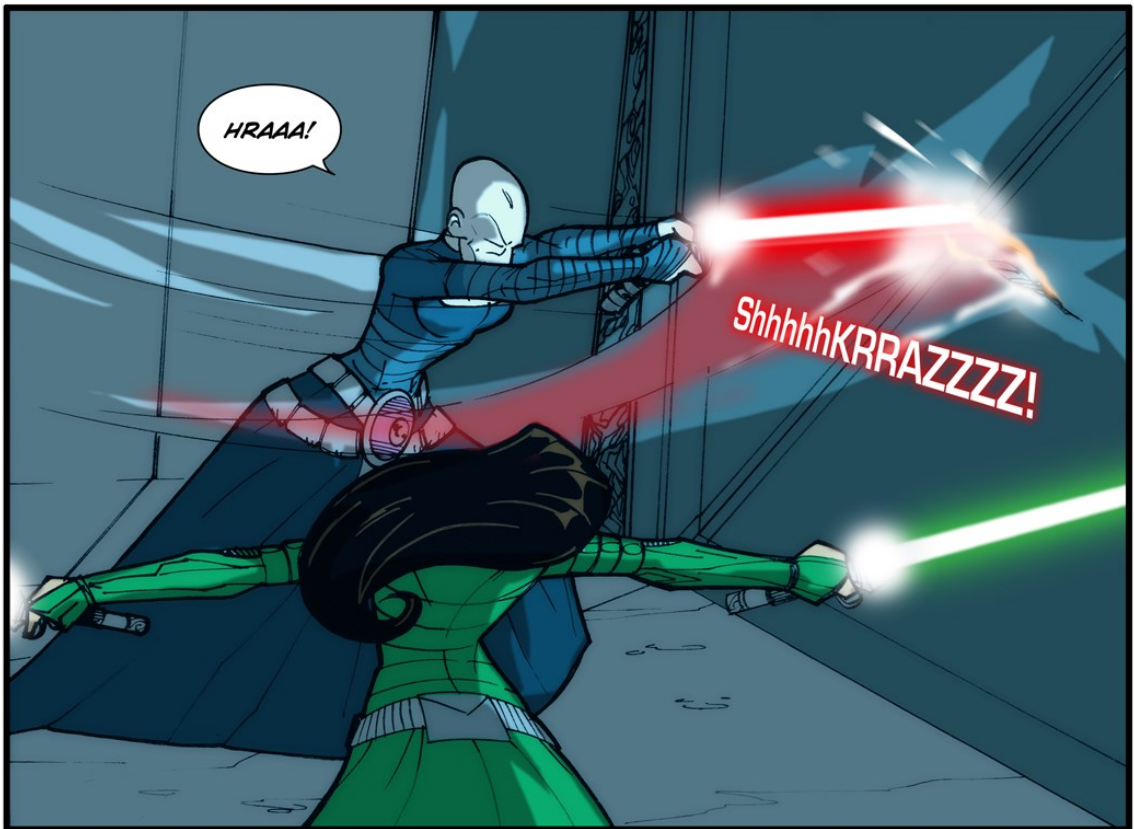




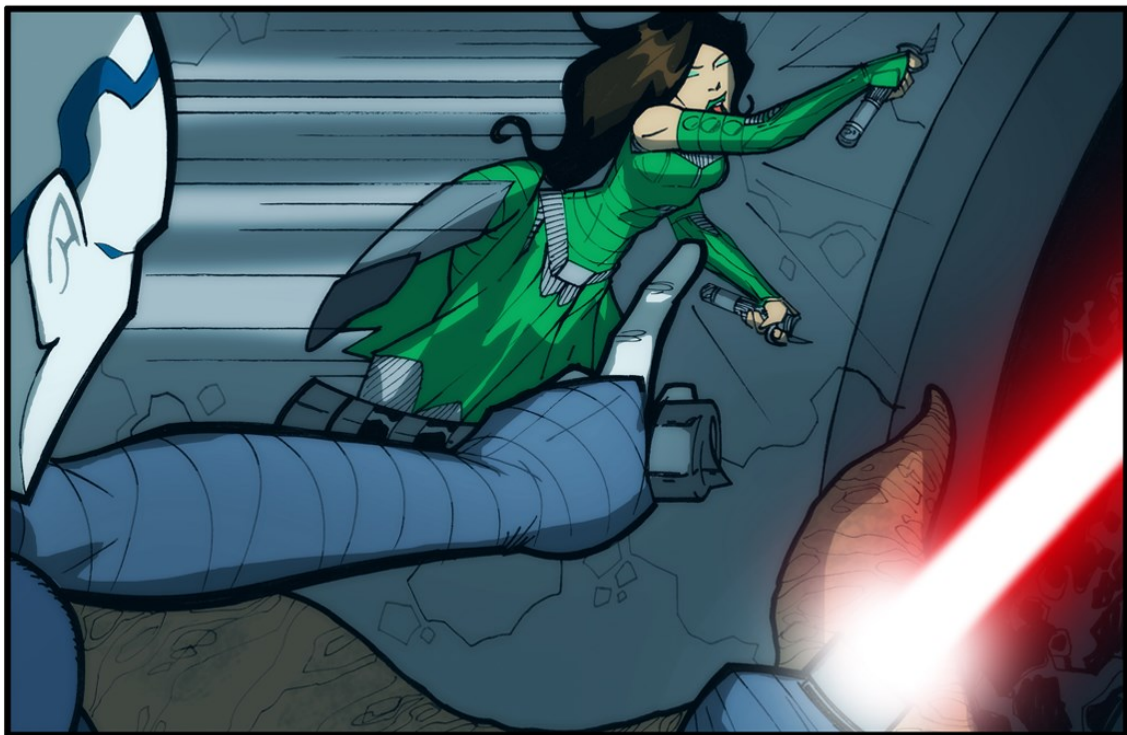


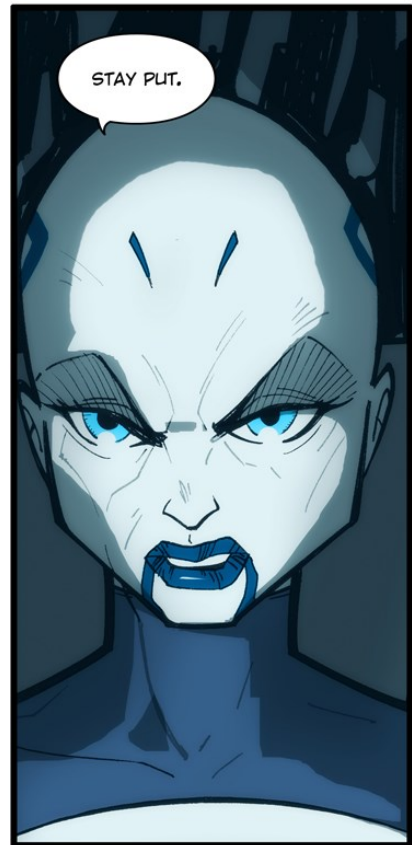








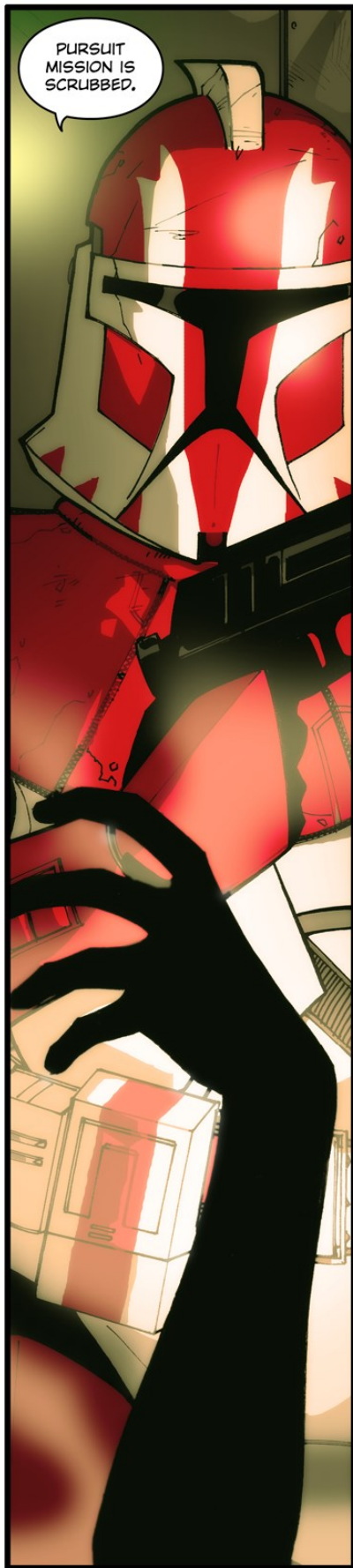


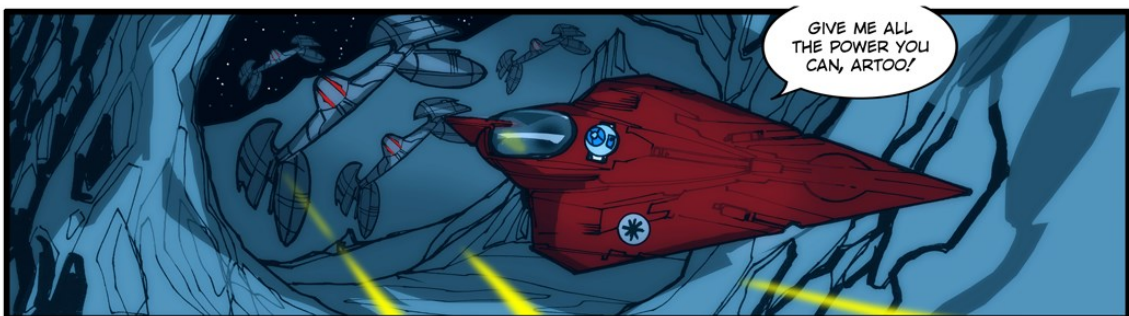
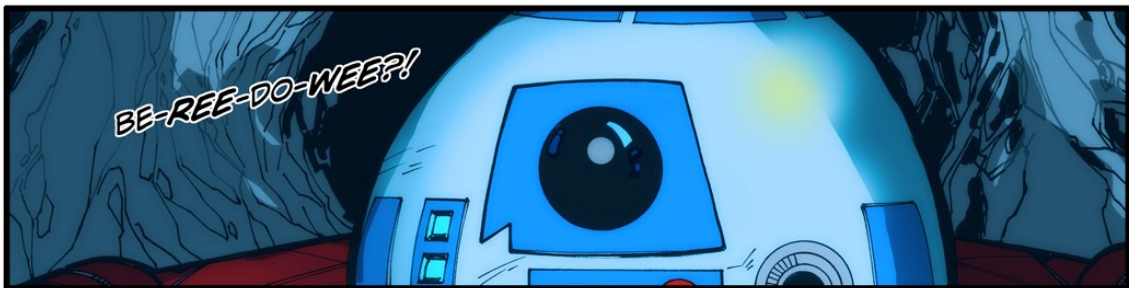
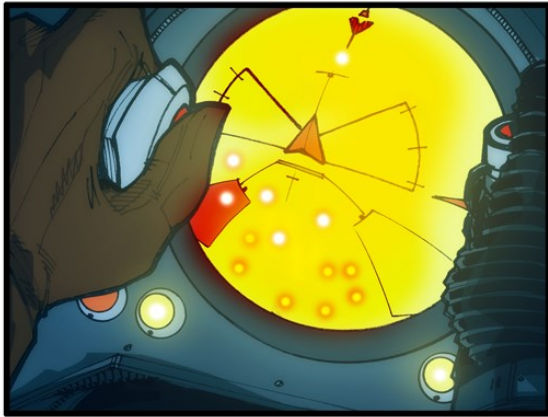
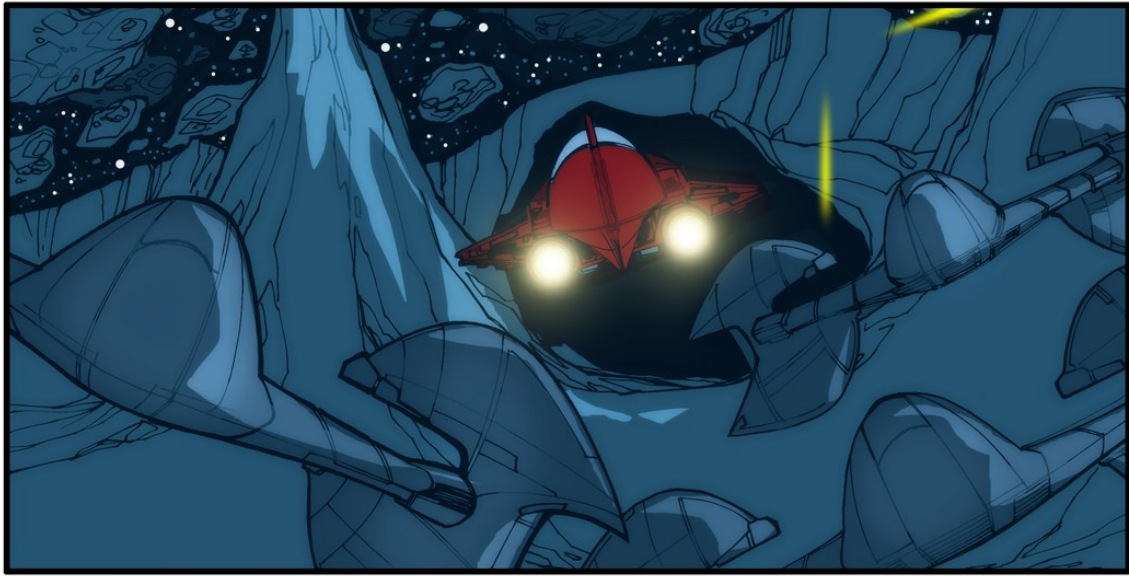


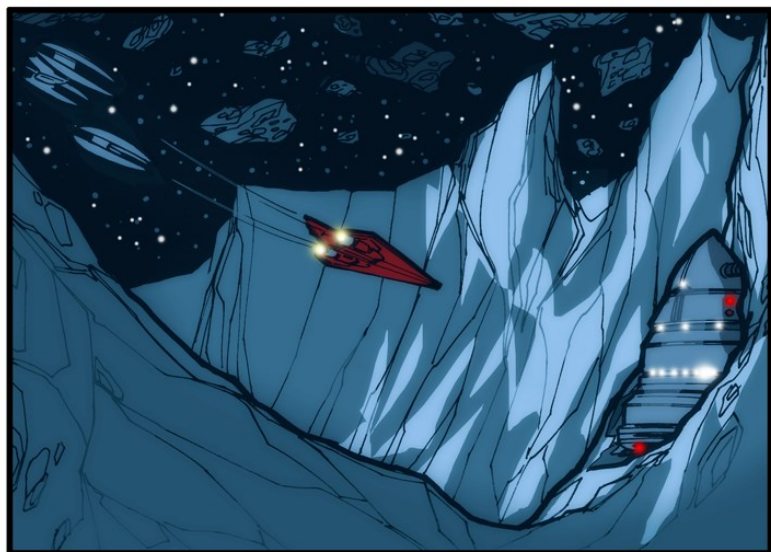


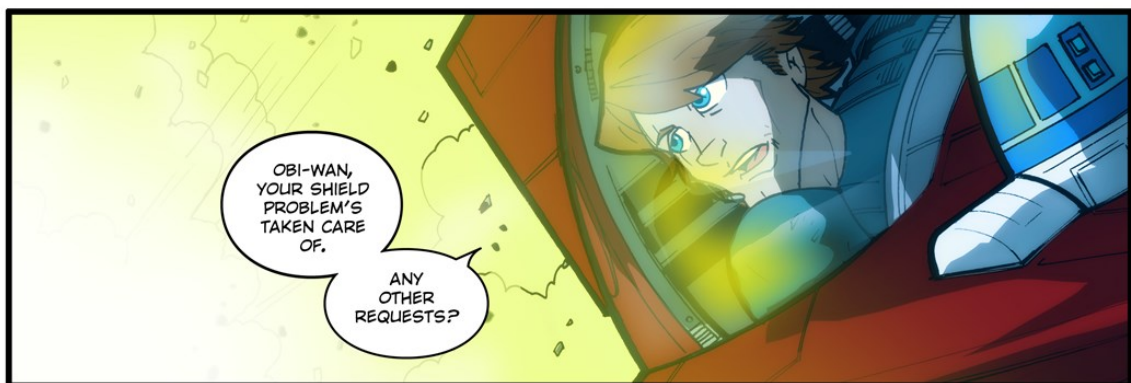
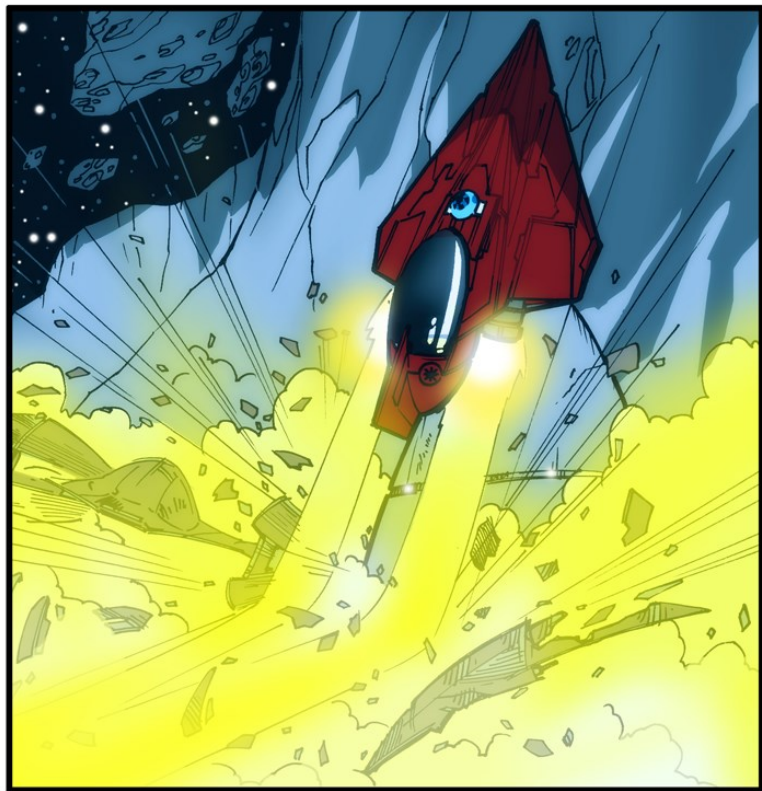
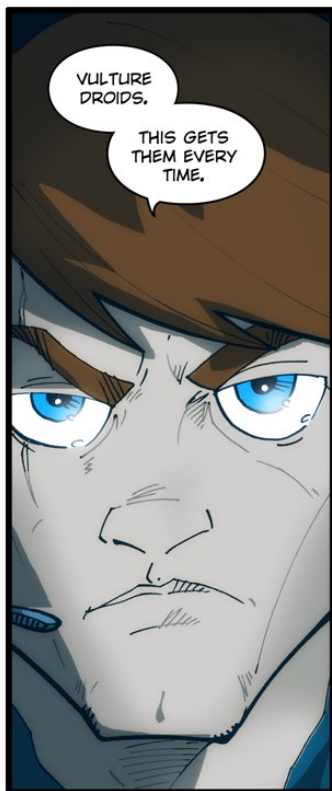














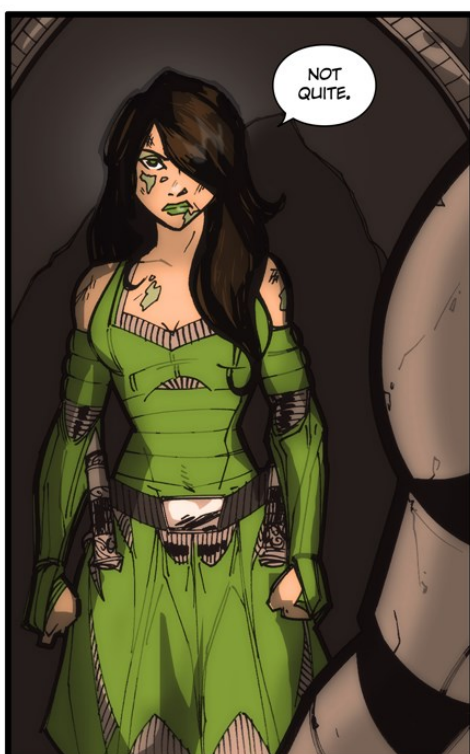
LATER...

OUR THANKS AGAIN, MASTER JEDI.

IT IS OUR DUTY, CHIEF FOREMAN. I AM GLAD YOU AND YOUR PEOPLE ARE SAFE.



DID I MISS ALL THE FUN? IS EVERYTHING ALL WRAPPED UP LIKE A BOONTA EVE PRESENT?



NOT QUITE.



MASTER RELIS?

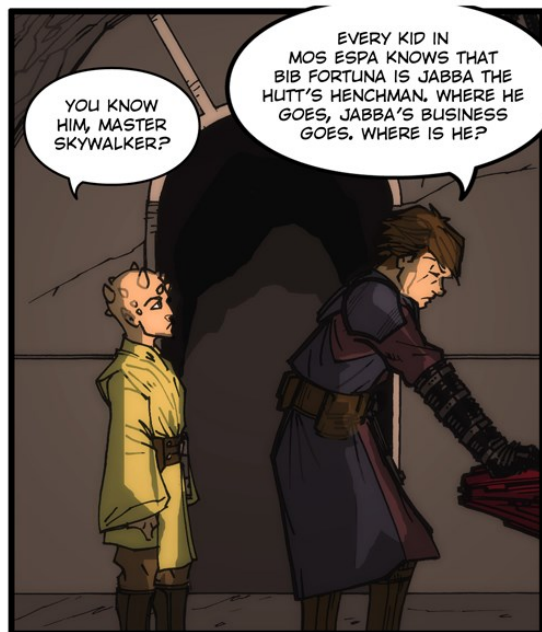
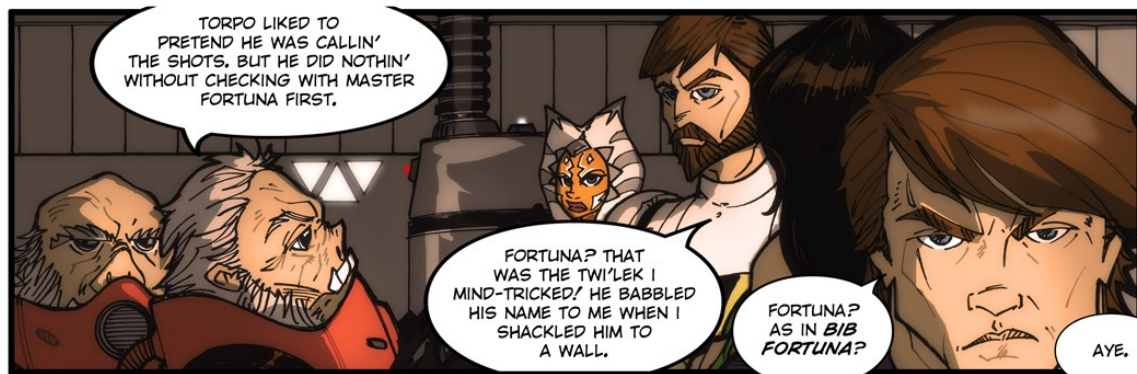
WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?

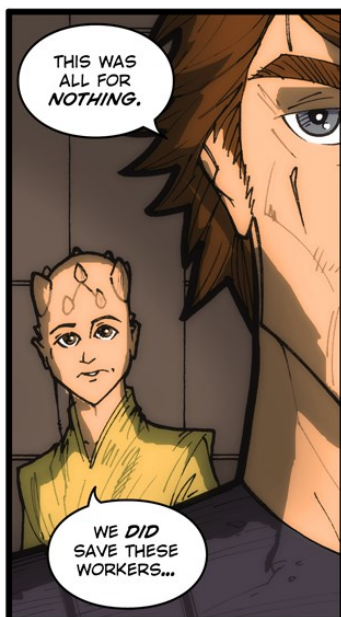
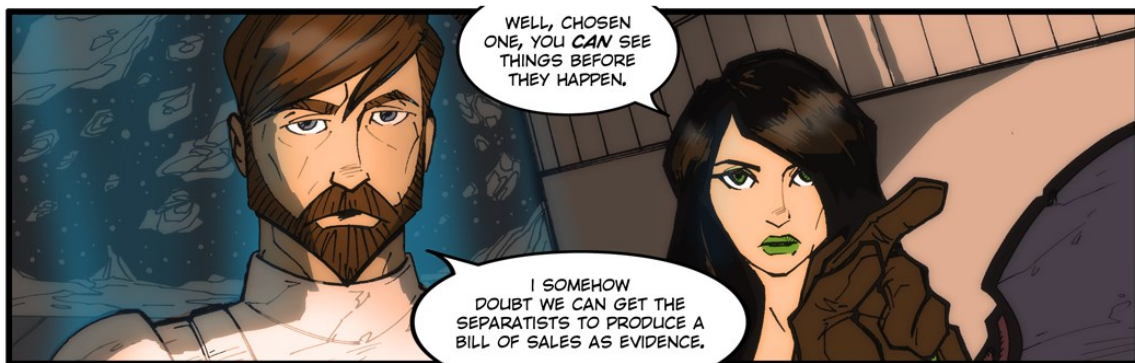
IT LOOKS LIKE A HUTT HAPPENED.

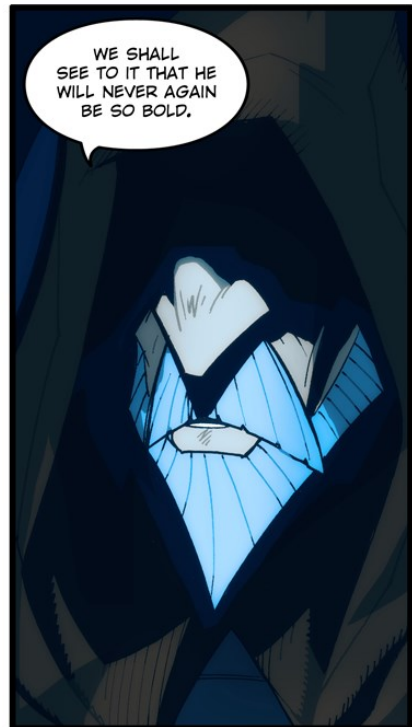
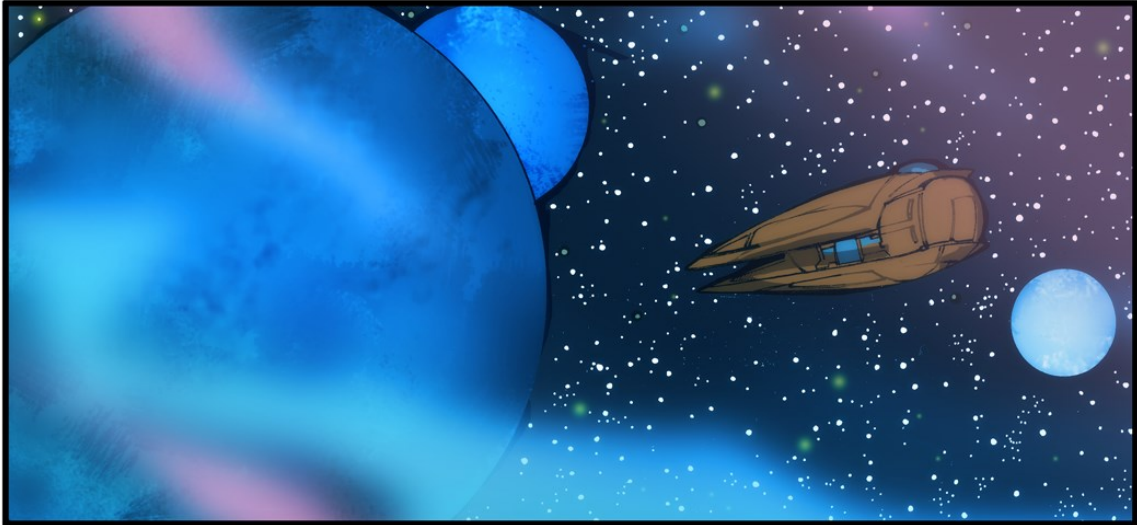


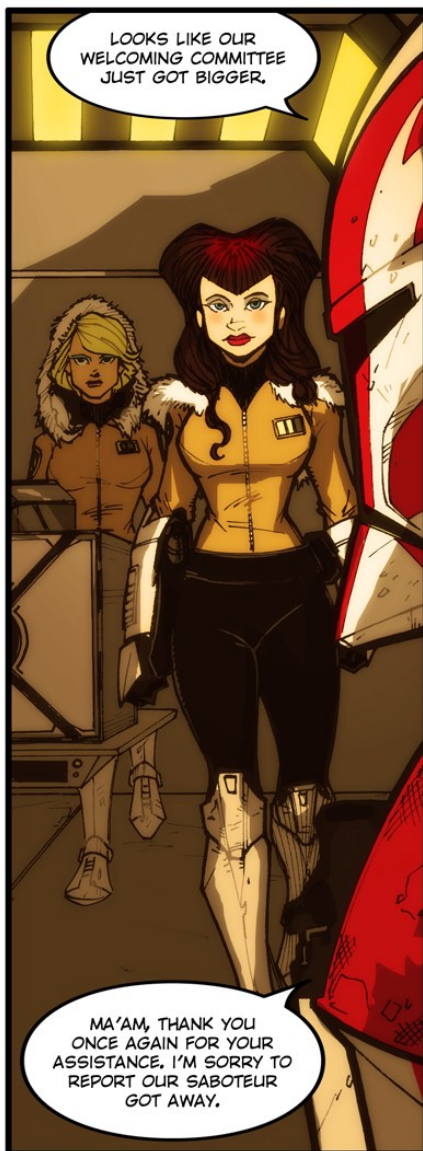
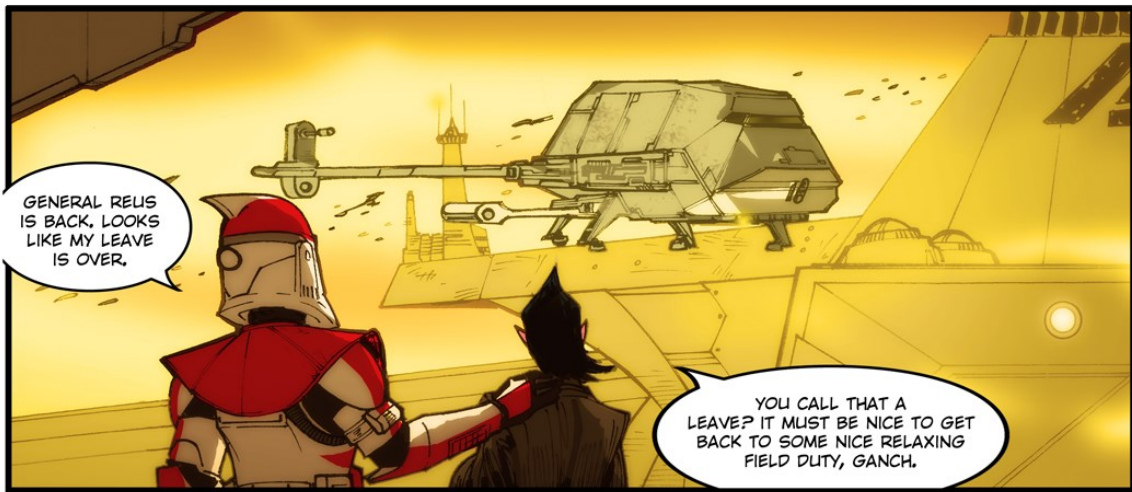
VENTRESS ESCAPED. SHE KILLED TORPO THE HUTT.

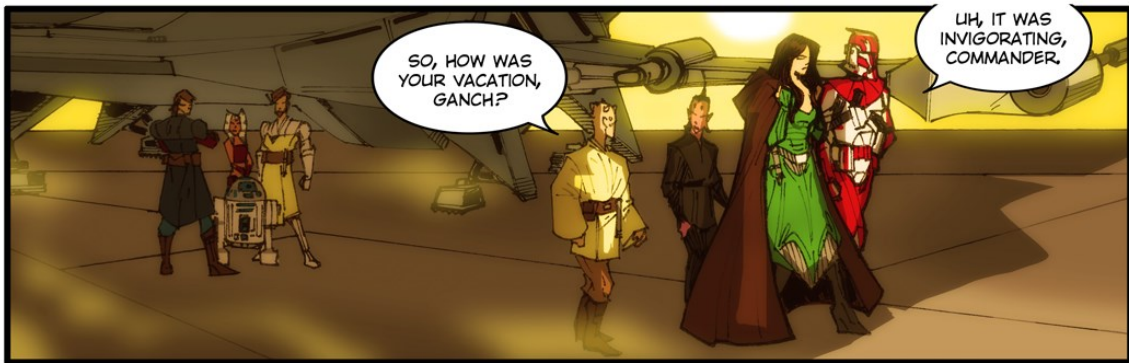
I WITNESSED IT UP-CLOSE, VERY UP-CLOSE.











21 bby

Speaking Silently

Captain Rex knew his brisk strides made his annoyance obvious to anyone watching. He didn't care. An entire squad captured, Separatists preparing to collapse his left flank, generals hollering at him from Sector Command, and now someone from local militia was insisting on taking up time he didn't have?

Rex came to a halt in the middle of the forward operating base, scowling at the idea that a jumble of prefab shelters and camo-netting merited so lofty a name. His troopers in Torrent Company saw him coming and found other places to be. From their reactions, Rex knew what the expression on his face must look like. He didn't care about that either.

The militiaman waiting for him gave no sign of noticing the barely contained anger on Rex's face. He was a tall human, slim and nut-brown, with a strong chin and dark, darting eyes. Another militiaman stood behind him.

"Captain Rex?" the man asked languidly. "Lieutenant Sollaw ap-Orwien, Ereesus Planetary Security Forces. And this is Corporal Dafyd."

Technically, Rex supposed, he outranked the militiamen.

But this was Ereesus, and locals on many worlds resented taking orders from clones, even when those orders saved their lives.

So he kept his voice carefully controlled - brisk but not impolite.

"What's this about, soldier?" he asked.

"The holo of the squad of militiamen captured last night," ap-Orwien said. "I need to see it."

Rex cocked an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

"It was Sergeant Palola's squad, wasn't it?" ap-Orwien asked.

"Palola's a militiaman, about my height and build. The Separatists paraded him on the holo, showing off their captive. That's correct, isn't it, Captain?"

"It might be," Rex growled, thinking of chronos ticking down in the logic units of Separatist tactical droids out beyond the ridge. "If it were, why would it matter?"

"Because Palo's a Lorradian like me," ap-Orwien said. "Is the holo's visual feed good quality? I need to know what Palo said in it."

Rex brought one hand down on a console with a bang, no longer caring about being polite or the possibility of complaints from local militia to Sector Command. He couldn't afford to spend even a small part of his precious time answering stupid questions based on misconceived notions.

"He didn't say anything," Rex said. "They wouldn't let him, of course. These are tacs we're dealing with, Lieutenant, not those idiot B1s."

A corner of ap-Orwien's mouth jerked upward.

"If the visual's good quality, I guarantee you he said plenty," ap-Orwien said. "Only the tac would never know it, Captain-and neither would you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Only another Lorradian would understand," ap-Orwien said.

Rex hesitated. What would General Skywalker say? Not that General Skywalker was any guide to running a by-the-book military operation. Still... the Jedi certainly got results.

I'm going to regret this. Rex thought, giving ap-Orwien a curt wave. "You two come with me. You can explain on the way."

* * *

"I'll give you the short version," ap-Orwien said as he hurried after Rex, boots slipping and sliding in the thick greenish mud of a late spring afternoon on Ereesus. "You've heard of the Kanz Disorders, Captain?"

"Only just," Rex said. "Ancient Republic, localized conflict."

Ap-Orwien and Dafyd exchanged a quick look. When he turned back, ap-Orwien's eyes had turned cold and flinty.

"You're right about the ancient Republic part - the Kanz Disorders were nearly four millennia ago," ap-Orwien said.

"Nearly six billion beings died, many of them my fellow Lorradians."

"No offense meant, Lieutenant," Rex said. "I'm afraid these days I don't have time to hit the history books. So. The short version, if you please."

"Very well, Captain," ap-Orwien said as they ducked into the operations room. "During the Kanz Disorders Argazdan fanatics enslaved the Lorradians. For three centuries we were forbidden to speak to each other."

Rex returned a salute from troopers Jesse and Ringo, then gave ap-Orwien a nod.

"I'm sorry to hear it," Rex said. "Jesse, activate the holotable and play the Separatist transmission we received last night."

Jesse nodded, fingers flying over the holotable's keypad.

A moment later a hologram shimmered to life. The captured Lorradian sergeant stood glumly beside Oz, the Torrent Company trooper serving as a liaison between the Grand Army of the Republic and the militia.

The trooper's face-identical to that of Rex and Jesse- was carefully blank, betraying no emotion. He'd been trained to reveal nothing if captured. They all had.

Battle droids surrounded the two men. A tactical droid turned the Lorradian to face the holocamera, its mechanical face seeming somehow infuriatingly smug.

As Rex had told ap-Orwien, neither Palola nor Oz said a word as the tactical droid made threats, followed by demands it knew the Republic wouldn't meet. In fact, Rex barely saw the Lorradian move for the two-minute length of the holorecording. Ap-Orwien glanced at Dafyd, nodded, and looked back at Rex.

"We'll need a gunship," ap-Orwien said. "But the extraction team can be minimal-four or five troopers at most."

"Just a moment," Rex said. "I deploy gunships and extraction teams around here, not you. Now, what are you talking about?"

"My apologies-I sometimes forget not everyone's a Lorradian," ap-Orwien said. "Your trooper, Palo and the rest of the squad are being held in the basement of a depot at the top of the Hidaci Ridge. Seven captives total. Only way out is up a narrow flight of stairs, so guards are minimal. The tactical droid's base of operations is an old granary halfway down the hill. The Separatists have stockpiled artillery and fuel at points along the road-Dafyd and I can pinpoint them for you on a satellite map."

Ringo looked incredulously at Rex.

"And you learned this how?" Rex asked.

"Palo told us, of course!" ap-Orwien replied. "Well, he didn't tell us. But he told any Lorradian who happened to be watching. Good thing the tacs don't care about culture or history any more than you do, Captain, or they'd never have put him on-camera."

"I still don't understand-"

"We call it kinetic communication, Captain," ap-Orwien said. "With speech forbidden, we learned to talk to each other through the tiniest movements, the smallest gestures."

"And you can use that to discuss granaries and basements and artillery dumps?" Rex asked.

"Perhaps you'd like to test us," ap-Orwien said. "I'll leave the room. You tell your trooper here something, with Dafyd listening. I'll come back in and Dafyd will give me the message."

"Fair enough," Rex said.

Ap-Orwien nodded and left the operations room. Rex stepped over to Jesse and Ringo, then hesitated. Jesse raised his eyebrows.

"I'm, uh, not in the habit of making up tactical information," Rex explained, slightly embarrassed. "Um ... send three squads to the ridge line. Squad on left takes point. Squad on the right will deploy with droid poppers. You know what droid poppers are, Corporal?"

"Electromagnetic pulse grenades," Dafyd said in thickly accented Basic. "Very good against the clankers."

Jesse grinned.

"Right," Rex said. He poked his head out to summon ap-Orwien, then turned to watch Dafyd. Now that he was looking closely, he could see the other Lorrrian moving in small, subtle ways-shifting his feet, blinking his eyes, twitching the corners of his mouth. But it was nothing that you'd register as out of the ordinary.

"Three squads to the ridge," ap-Orwien said. "Left taking point, right carrying EMP grenades."

Ringo whistled. "Got it dead to rights, Captain."

"It's not exceptional hearing, or transmitters or something like that?" Rex asked.

"Just the Lorrrian art, Captain, one we've never given up.

Do you need another test?"

"That won't be necessary," Rex said. "Jesse, prep a gunship for liftoff at sundown. You, Ringo, Kix and Dogma. Plus the three of us. Have Kix bring field medi-kits, and ... no, wait a minute."

He turned back to the two Lorrrians.

"You're sure about the fuel and artillery dumps?" Rex asked. "You can pinpoint the location?"

Ap-Orwien nodded.

Rex paused. How much would General Skywalker risk on a chance like this-an opportunity based on something he could barely detect and had no hope of understanding?

Rex realized he already knew the answer to that one.

"Don't send that order yet, Jesse -get me Sector Command first," he said.

* * *

The gunship had been modified for stealth-fitted with engine shields and baffles and sprayed with a quick-dry black polymer that reduced its electromagnetic emissions to a whisper and its heat signature to a faint smudge. It was also unarmed, its missile launchers, ball turrets and laser cannons sacrificed to eliminate drag and noise.

The modifications made the main hold so quiet that the clones and the two Lorradians could converse in normal voices -yet Rex still found himself glaring at his troopers whenever they raised their voices above a low husk. The lights were out, but they could see easily enough in the moonlight. It fell through the slats in the gunship's retractable side doors, silvery and accusingly bright.

Stop it, Rex told himself. You can't turn off the moon.

"So the Y-wings will come in from the southeast?" ap-Orwien asked, wanting to go over the plan again.

Rex nodded. Better that the Lorradians ask one time too many than one time too few.

"Right, while we circle and come in from the north," Rex said. "The Y-wings will hit the fuel and artillery dumps. Meanwhile, our units will be making a big show, as if they're planning to advance. That should draw the clankers south, leaving us time to slip in and free our people."

"And their tactical droid, he will not figure it out?" asked Dafyd.

"We'll know soon enough, won't we?"

"Don't worry, boss," said Jesse with a grin. " Sending that fuel dump sky-high will definitely get their attention."

"What makes you think I'm worried?" Rex asked, checking his DC-17s to make sure the power packs were seated properly.

Jesse grinned. "Maybe it's that you've got that look on your face that you get when you're worried."

"And what look is that?" Rex asked - but it was ap-Orwien who answered.

"I think it is this one," he said, and then his lips pressed into a line, his eyes widened and looked straight ahead, his shoulders and back went rigid, and his hands began moving swiftly and precisely, field-stripping an imaginary firearm.

The clones gaped at the Lorradian. Ringo was the first to laugh, followed by Jesse and then the others. Rex forced himself to smile. He had recognized himself instantly, though ap-Orwien looked nothing like him.

"Do Jesse next," Ringo urged.

"What's the point?-" Rex asked. "We're the same person."

"You're not," ap-Orwien said. "You all move, act, and react differently."

Rex shook his head. "We're clones."

"Which matters until birth," ap-Orwien said. " After that, life makes you different - as it does with all of us."

"Maybe," Rex said. "The mimicry-it's part of your kinetic communication?"

"Related," ap-Orwien said. "With a language of small gestures, you learn to notice things. We're excellent actors, imitators, interpreters."

"And observers," Rex said. "But how does it work? How do you separate the gestures that communicate something from the ones that are just gestures?"

"That's something we don't share," he said. "We have had many enemies over the years. Today we are working with your Republic, but tomorrow things may be... different."

Rex started to object, but one of the pilots broke in over the comm.

"Captain, fighters are beginning their attack run," the pilot said. "Expect to have you on the ground in eight minutes."

Rex looked around the hold, saw his troopers' faces harden. He knew they were reviewing mission objectives in their heads. That was what he was starting to do, as he'd done in thousands of drills on Kamino, and then on battlefields- so many that he had no chance of remembering them all.

"Buckets," he said, raising his helmet and settling it over his head, reorienting it so faceplate was forward. Jesse, Kix, Ringo and Dogma were doing the same. Ap-Orwien and Dafyd sat rigid.

"Check your heads-up displays and comlinks,"

Rex said, the words automatic by now.

A bright orange flash on the ground somewhere behind them lit up the main hold, followed almost instantly by another. A moment later the gunship shuddered and they heard the roar of the impacts.

"Fighters report ordnance delivered," one of the pilots said calmly. "We are locked in on objective."

The gunship banked to the right, beginning its descent towards the rectangles and squares of fields below, stripped of color by the moonlight.

It wasn't until the gunship doors began to retract that Rex realized he'd forgotten to ask the militiamen something.

"It's ten meters down - do you know how to fast-rope?" he asked, even as the doors opened all the way and Jesse and Ringo flung the ends of the heavy cables down into the darkness.

To his relief, ap-Orwien nodded and smiled, pantomiming a hand-over-hand descent.

"Let's go then," Rex ordered, and a moment later the two clones were descending the rope into the compound below. The two Lorradians went next, then Rex and Kix.

Rex let go of the rope a meter above the ground, slipped in a slick of mud on the permacrete and wound up on his hands and knees. Cursing, he got to his feet, pistols drawn. They were in a small walled area, with a gate at one end and a platform at the other-a loading dock for speeder trucks. His helmet's night-vision filter showed him Jesse and Ringo, scanning the yard with blasters raised. The Lorradians were standing back to back in the center of the yard beside Kix, night-vision goggles over their eyes.

Dogma landed beside Rex and he heard the faint shush of the gunship's engines as it accelerated, already climbing skyward.

"Yard's clear, sir," Jesse said.

"Into the depot, then," Rex said. "Lieutenant-any way to make use of your communications skills in a combat situation?"

Ap-Orwien shook his head, but Dafyd patted his blaster.

"Good shots," he said.

"Glad to hear it," Rex said. "We go in fast, get our people, get out fast. Leave only footprints and scrapped clankers."

"Roger, roger," Jesse said, a hint of merriment in his voice. He and Ringo hoisted themselves onto the loading dock and attached charges to the broad door leading into the depot, the other clones and Lorradians arranging themselves on either side. The door blew and the two clones ducked through the ragged hole they'd made, blasters howling in the space beyond.

Rex leapt through the hole in the door, its edges a brilliant green in his night vision.

Two battle droids were down on the floor, birdlike heads blown off. Jesse and Ringo were already on the other side of the cargo bay, examining the outer door.

On the other side of that door they'd find a narrow walkway between the loading dock and the depot office- if the instructions silently transmitted by the Lorradian captive could be trusted.

Rex decided not to think about that if.

The door's indicator showed it was unlocked. Ringo nodded at Jesse and the two thumbed it open and dashed through, moving low with their guns raised. The walkway was just as the Lorradians had said. The door on the other side led to a cramped space around an unlovely, squat office. The clones cleared the yard, moving in pairs with practiced ease, then moved to cover the door leading inside.

It was locked.

"Our people should be two floors down," Rex said as Jesse and Ringo set charges. "Dogma, give them a droid popper as a wake-up call."

The door exploded outwards and Dogma flung an EMP grenade inside, almost immediately wreathed in a nimbus of blue energy.

This is too easy, Rex thought as he stepped over the smoking door jamb, pausing to put a blaster bolt into the cognitive unit of a battle droid whose legs were still spasming. Too easy made him nervous-it never lasted.

Inside, the lights were on. The troopers switched off their night vision and the Lorradians lifted their goggles. Their boots clattered on the stairwell-and then Jesse yelled.

"Commandos!"

Descending the stairs, Rex ducked his head to try and spot the droids. That saved his life. Even as Jesse and Ringo fired at the commando droids advancing up the stairs, a third commando detached itself from a jumble of pipes on the ceiling above them, vibrosword slashing through the space where Rex's head had been.

The droid landed on the stairs behind Rex and kicked him in the rear, sending him tumbling down after Jesse and Ringo as the whistle of blaster fire filled the stairwell.

Rex landed on his chest, nose smashing into the inside of his helmet. His hands and pistols were trapped beneath him. He tried to regain his feet, only to have something slam him down again and drive the air out of his lungs. Blows hammered at his armor - the commando droid, he realized. He flung himself sideways in an effort to free himself, wondering if he'd hear the sound of the vibrosword as it cut through his body glove and then his flesh. Or perhaps he wouldn't hear anything.

The droid was dead weight, he realized. Above him, ap-Orwien raised his blaster and smiled. Sparks spat from the back of the commando droid's head.

"Nice shot," Rex said, heaving the thing aside.

"You okay, boss?" Jesse asked.

"Never better," Rex said. Blood filled his mouth, ran down his chin.

They were at the bottom of the stairwell, in front of a locked door. Rex stared at it, conscious of his troopers' eyes on him.

If the captives were directly on the other side, blowing it open might injure or kill them. But hot-wiring the door would take time -time any guards might use to execute their hostages.

He looked at the Lorradians. Ap-Orwien shrugged, his face grim.

Sometimes you have to guess, Rex thought.

"Charges," Rex said. "Watch your targets. Dogma, droid popper."

They retreated half a flight up to clear the blast area then raced back down as the light and noise of the blast diminished. No tangle of bodies awaited them on the other side. After a desperate second Rex saw the prisoners sitting against the far wall, arms behind their backs. Their eyes were looking....

Rex was firing his pistols before he saw the commando droid above them. Its vibrosword hit the floor point first with a shriek, then pinwheeled across the room, just missing Dafyd's head. Then the smoking hulk of the commando droid plummeted after it.

"All seven accounted for," Kix said. "Minimal injuries."

Rex started to activate his comlink and call the gunship, then hesitated. He pulled his helmet off, wiping at his bloody nose.

"You-Sergeant Palola," he said. "The granary-how far is it?"

Palola looked up from embracing ap-Orwien and Dafyd.

"A hundred meters at most," he said.

"And you're sure that tactical droid is using it as headquarters?"

Palola nodded, face grim. "It interrogated us there."

Ap-Orwien cocked his head at Rex.

"And here I thought you were a cautious man, Captain," he said.

"One day I'd like to be," Rex said. "For now, I want a word with that tac. In person."

* * *

This time, there was no need for fast-roping-the gunship settled onto the muddy plain outside Torrent Company's forward operating base and the clones hopped down from the deck, the Lorradians right behind them.

Rex held up the tactical droid's severed head. He acknowledged the waiting clones' whoops with a brief nod, then turned to the grinning ap-Orwien.

"Impressive work, Lieutenant," Rex said. "Everything was as you said it would be."

"Exactly as Palo said it would be," ap-Orwien corrected him.

"I was just the translator."

Rex glanced at Palola, who offered a tired smile.

"Well, I wish we had more like you," Rex said. "That kinetic communication's a nice piece of work, but you can shoot, too."

"I wish there were more of us too," ap-Orwien said. "Despite tonight's victory, we are outnumbered. The Separatists can make more droids, but we cannot make men."

His voice trailed off and he looked away, embarrassed.

"No offense meant, Captain," ap-Orwien said quietly.

"None taken," Rex said. "We were made to be soldiers, it's true, but we're not machines. At least the Jedi don't regard us that way."

"May that always be so," ap-Orwien said, then looked around.

"It's too late for us to get back to our headquarters tonight. Is there somewhere we can sleep?"

"We'd be honored to have you bunk with us, Lieutenant," Rex said.

"Much appreciated," ap-Orwien said, then hesitated. "And perhaps you'd like to join us for a few hands of sabacc before we turn in?"

Rex looked from ap-Orwien to Palola. Their faces were blank. Carefully blank, he thought.

Rex shook his head and smiled.

"Sabacc with masters of nonverbal communication? I may be a product of accelerated aging, Lieutenant, but I wasn't born yesterday."

New Droid Army

Shortly after the outbreak of the Clone Wars, the Jedi Council receives a distress call from Tatooine and sends Padawan Anakin Skywalker to investigate. He is assaulted by groups of Womp rats and battle droids and is informed in Mos Espa that something must be disturbing the Womp rats' nests. He travels through Xelric Draw to the Womp rat caves and kills the Anoobas that were apparently responsible for the disturbance. As he leaves the caves, Skywalker encounters Aurra Sing, who attempts to collect a bounty posted on his head by throwing a thermal detonator and sending several of her "associates" after him with vibro-axes before fleeing.

Arriving back in town, a man informs him that Watto could probably help him find Raala Ponchar, the sender of the transmission. However, assassins hired by the Hutts are looking for Anakin. After fighting his way through, Anakin finds Watto, who informs him that Ponchar is at a moisture farm north of town. On his way there, another moisture farmer tells Anakin that Tusken Raiders have kidnapped some other farmers, and Anakin agrees to free them, having "no love for the Tusken Raiders." After this, one of the farmers leads him to Bellek's homestead, where Ponchar is, but they come across a destroyed homestead on the way. The man says that the droids are like none he has ever seen, led by a "witch," had wrecked the place, and now the sand people are looking for salvageable materials. A few homesteads later, Anakin finds Bellek, who says that Ponchar was kidnapped by Jabba the Hutt. Bellek warns Anakin that he will have to travel through the Jundland Wastes, which are "prime Tusken Raider territory." Anakin assures Bellek that he "know[s] how to deal with Tusken Raiders" and asks about the "witch," but Bellek decides he should get back to work on his moisture farm.

Anakin arrives at Jabba's Palace and fights his way through guards and battle droids only to meet Aurra Sing at the front door of the palace, who claims she will enjoy watching Skywalker die. Just then, an unknown figure appears dressed in red and wielding two red lightsabers, telling Sing to save her strength, and Force chokes Anakin. The new arrival then tells Sing to store Anakin in the dungeons, and that she will inform her master "that the Jedi is no longer a threat to our operation." Anakin awakes in the dungeons of Jabba's

palace and there finds Raala Ponchar. He easily opens the door to their cell with the Force and the two escape together. Ponchar informs Anakin that Jabba is being paid by Wat Tambor to assist in smuggling construction materials and cortosis to Metalorn. The two free the other prisoners from the dungeon and Anakin escapes on a skiff, which is shot down in the desert by another skiff. The Dark Jedi who captured him previously, named Saato, confronts him near a Sarlacc pit, but she is defeated. Anakin contacts his master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and tells him what has happened. Obi-Wan, however, tells Anakin to return to Coruscant, as it is under attack.

Anakin arrives at Galactic City and finds Obi-Wan waiting for him there. Obi-Wan explains that Separatist battle droids are attacking the underlevels of Coruscant and instructs Anakin to help fight off the invasion, and then leaves for the Jedi Temple to gather reinforcements. Anakin feels a disturbance in the Force and encounters a lightsaber-wielding man named Trenox, who accuses Anakin of having caused him some trouble, then flees. Anakin pursues him to the underlevels. There, he meets fellow Padawan Barriss Offee, whose troops have been overrun by C-B3 cortosis battle droids. Anakin says he'll take care of it and assists clone troopers in eliminating B1 and C-B3 battle droids as well as Rodian combatants, ASN-121 assassin droids, and droidekas. He runs into Dexter Jettster, who tells him about a Jedi with a red lightsaber who ran into the nightclub. As Anakin pursues, Dexter tells him to remind Obi-Wan to come visit him in Coco Town more often.

Anakin enters the club, and duels Trenox briefly inside, before Trenox flees yet again and Anakin chases him through a cargo bay. He finds a bald male Chiss and asks him where Trenox is. The Chiss says that Anakin is too late and that Trenox has probably already destroyed most of the Jedi Temple in the two minutes since Anakin last saw him. The Chiss then leaves, claiming to have work to do. Anakin takes an airspeeder to the Jedi Temple, but instead he finds Count Dooku waiting for him. Dooku comments on Anakin's cybernetic arm, saying it suits him, and after an exchange of comebacks Dooku excuses himself, as he has to destroy the Jedi Archives. Anakin protests at the prospect of the loss of a millennia (sic) of knowledge, but Dooku maintains that without

the knowledge contained in the Archives, his Separatist allies will be able to win the war. Dooku then leaves Anakin with a C-B3 cortosis battle droid.

After dispatching it, Anakin contacts Obi-Wan with the newfound knowledge of the plot to destroy the Jedi Archives. Obi-Wan's transmission is cut out by a battle of some sort, and Anakin resolves to stop the assault on his own. After fighting through the Jedi Archives, he finds Trenox and they duel in a small room away from the main Archives. Anakin defeats him and receives a hologram transmission from Master Yoda, who says reinforcements have arrived and that Anakin should meet with the Council. There, they inform him that Obi-Wan has been injured in a duel with Dooku and must recover from his wounds. They then tell Anakin to go to Metalorn and find and retrieve Wat Tambor and the plans to the cortosis droids.

After landing on Metalorn in his Jedi Starfighter, Anakin infiltrates a droid factory. Inside, he contacts Master Yoda and tells him that Dooku indeed seems to be creating a new droid army. Yoda replies that Anakin must destroy the factory, as the Jedi Order cannot stand against such a threat. Deeper in the factory complex, Anakin meets the Dark Jedi brothers Vinoc and Karoc and engages them in lightsaber combat. After defeating them, he finds some charges with which to destroy the factory's five reactors. However, Wat Tambor greets him before he can reach the fifth reactor. Tambor brings in the Chiss bounty hunter, Vandalor, to kill Anakin. Anakin defeats him and takes Wat Tambor prisoner before planting the last detonator.

As Anakin and Tambor escape from the destroyed factory, Count Dooku arrives. The two duel, and Dooku says he senses confusion, anger, and pain in Anakin resulting from the death of his mother. Dooku taunts Anakin, trying to make him embrace the Dark Side of the Force in battle. Anakin attacks Dooku until he falls down, says that his master foresaw his defeat and that Anakin has ensured the fall of the Republic, and fades away.

Back on Coruscant, Anakin informs the council that he has destroyed the factory, defeated Dooku, and apprehended Wat Tambor, whom Supreme Chancellor Palpatine has requested is to be kept under the watch of his personal guard. Mace Windu and Yoda note that Anakin's skills are advancing

rapidly, although Yoda notes that he senses a shadow approaching, and that the Republic is growing weary of war. Anakin gives his word that he will always be there for the Republic.

CIS Shadowfeed

Dispatch 14:3:10 Edition

Republic Forces Shred Bassadroans

AGAO, BASSADRO-Demonstrating the desperate lengths to which the Republic will go to further their stranglehold on outlying worlds, evidence has surfaced that a Jedi-led battalion of clone troopers wiped out the entire mining village of Agao-Nir in the glassy volcanic crags of the Agao Ranges, killing an estimated 400 native villagers.

Transmissions from CIS Major Domb Treeter, former Appropriations Chief of the Techno Union, indicate that the clones began firing at the natural rock formations surrounding the Bassadroan village, and the Jedi General would order cease-fire only upon Treeter's surrender.

The barrage of anti-armor concussion missiles into the razor-sharp obsidian created a deadly storm of shrapnel that sliced through the mining village. The airborne rock fragments also damaged many CIS assets under Treeter's command.

Rather than have the Republic forces further target civilians or potential laborers, Treeter surrendered. With the loss of Bassadro, the Commerce Guild Presidente Shu Mai is recalculating mining quotas among strategic producer worlds to make up for the deficit.

"The callous lack of value shown by the Republic in this exercise is appalling," said Shu Mai in an official statement. "Each of those miners represented a hard worker with invested skill levels. The synergistic aggregate of the village total was far beyond the worth of each individual."

Confederate Credits Gaining Equity

HARNAIDAN, MUUNILINST--Though the non-exclusivity pact of the Intergalactic Banking Clan may have limited their military contributions to the Confederacy of Independent Systems cause, it has allowed the commerce entity to continue operations within Republic financial circles and bolster the value of the CIS credit.

"Our centuries-old lineage within the Core has leant credence to the newly minted currency, which represents the assets of the Separatist worlds," said Bank Communications Officer Lo Vapeet in his monthly statement. "In many worlds of the Mid Rim, it is trading at more than 50 percent of the value of a standard Republic credit, and in the Outer Rim, it is the exclusive currency of hundreds of worlds."

Republic Holonet News

CORE EDITION | 14:3:22

MINISTRY OF SCIENCE REVEALS BIO-WAR VACCINE

MINISCI ARCOLOGY, CORUSCANT-The recent scourge of biological weapons employed by Separatist forces are no longer a threat, according to a report from the Republic's Ministry of Science.

"Advancements in biological counter-agents have rendered the Separatist pathogens harmless," said Minister Glimmet Ledd, a member of the prestigious Luurian Genetic Enclave. "Data provided by the Jedi Knights have given us the key to understanding how the Separatists build these microbes and how best to destroy them."

Many Gungan colonists were killed by the release of a biological weapon on Ohma-D'un, a moon of Naboo. Jedi investigators were able to capture raw toxin samples from the Separatist outpost of Queyta eight months ago. Since then, the Ministry of Science has been developing vaccines for the deadly weapon.

"Analysis of the underlying structure of these weapons suggest that they are all built from the same principles," said Ledd. "By comparing our research of the trihexalon threat of a few years ago, we were able to formulate a successful vaccine."

Critics question whether the announcement of a cure will only prompt the Separatists to develop deadlier biological weapons. "Our scientists are ready to deal with any advancements; in this case, it is imperative we announce to the people of the Republic that a preventative solution awaits," said Ledd.

The Ministry of Science and the Refugee Relief Movement are partnering to produce and distribute the vaccine to med-centers throughout the Republic. The report indicates that a number of non-human species are especially susceptible to the Separatist toxins and are strongly encouraged to register with Republic health organizations for immediate inoculation.

PALPATINE REWARDS JEDI EFFORTS

JEDI TEMPLE, CORUSCANT-Recognizing "the selfless valor in the protection of the Republic and her worlds," Supreme Chancellor Palpatine recognized the honorable deeds of Jedi Knight Avan Post and Jedi Master Shaak Ti today with a gift of a grove of ch'hala trees in a ceremony held at the Jedi Temple.

Avan Post of Chandrila was recognized posthumously; he perished last month in a skirmish over Ando, during which he destroyed seven Techno Union Hardcell-class vessels. Post had served in many battlefronts early in the conflict. Asran Headows, Master Curator of the Galactic Museum on Coruscant announced the creation of a special exhibit honoring the fallen Jedi by year's end.

"Ch'hala trees are among my favorite specimens of the Republic's gardens. They are rigidly implacable yet sensitive to even the slightest disturbance, much like our revered friends in the Jedi Temple. I humbly ask that you accept these tokens of appreciation," said Palpatine.

"I am honored to receive this distinction in service to the Republic. Nonetheless, Jedi eschew possessions, and therefore I donate this gift to the Jedi Temple," said Ti. Her actions on Geonosis, Centares, and Dagub were cited by Palpatine in a list of notable accomplishments by the Togrutu Jedi Master.

Ti donated the grove of four dozen infant purple-green trees to the Jedi Council. The spectacular ch'hala trees have pressure-sensitive pigmentation in their bark that allows them to change hue and pattern when exposed to sound.

"We accept this recognition with gratitude, though it is our duty to protect the Republic," said Jedi Master Mace Windu. The Jedi Master then promised the infant grove would find prominent placement within the Jedi Temple.

CIS Shadowfeed

Dispatch 14:4:12 Edition

Wat Tambor Liberated

DENUS, FOUNDRY-Techno Union Foreman and CIS Supervising Combat Engineer Wat Tambor is recuperating in a hyperbaric recharge globe in his private estate on Foundry following a daring rescue mission executed by elite members of Tambor's staff.

After his capture by Republic forces, Tambor was relocated to a detainment center on Delrian. The staff of the detainment center employs a private security firm owned by the Commerce Guild, allowing the Confederacy detailed specifics of the facility's layout and security complement.

Five days ago, Tambor was permitted a visit by his staff, which consisted of two Skakoan legal deputies plus an unnamed Clawdite accomplice. Once within the facility, the Skakoans heroically decompressed their pressure shells, resulting in an explosion that incapacitated the squad of eight clone troopers assigned to escort Foreman Tambor.

The Clawdite was then able to bypass the automated defenses of the compound with as yet undisclosed devices supplied by the Techno Union. "It was undoubtedly a simple task of extricating the Foreman. We are the masters of technology," commented a Techno Union worker not wishing to be identified. "To think the Republic could devise machinery to slow us down is laughable."

Not surprisingly, this story has yet to be reported in the government-dominated mainstream Republic media.

Republic Breaks Ando Demilitarization Pact

QUANTILL CITY, ANDO -- Breaking their own longstanding weapons restrictions against the Andoan people, the Republic has armed Aqualish loyalists against the Andoan natives that have separated .; from the Republic. When the world of Ando seceded last year, the outlying Andoan Free Colonies, represented by Senator Gorothin Vagger, remained part of the Republic. Represented by Senator Po Nudo, the Andoan natives immediately overturned Republic demilitarization efforts and were finally able to protect themselves with armaments supplied by the Confederacy.

Mercenary vessels hired by the Andoan loyalists-in direct violation of the Treaty of Raquish-began harassing Andoan natives. Examination of the mercenary craft wreckage indicates it belongs to the Ualaq Pride, a loyalist-aligned extremist group. Experts found modern Republic technologies modified for their unique four-eyed vision, suggesting direct complicity on the part of the government. Of course, Senator Vagger has not commented on the accusations of treaty violation, nor has the Republic or Andoan Colonial media reported the breach.

Confederacy strategists, theorize that nearby Rodia is the leading supplier of the Andoan colonist weaponry and is likely to be drawn into the escalating civil war.

Republic Holonet News

CORE EDITION | 14:4:14

SEPARATISTS LEAVE ATRAKEN IN RUINS

KATTELLYN CITY, ATRAKEN-The Refugee Relief Movement has declared the planet Atraken - the site of a prolonged battle between Republic and Separatist forces - an "unsalvageable disaster" unfit for humanoid habitation.

The world, once a rich source of doonium, became a battleground when CIS protectionist forces refused to relinquish control of the mining operation there. Entrenched in the planet's crust, the Separatists unleashed biochemical agents to deter the Republic's clone troopers. This resulted in thousands of civilian casualties as the toxins seeped into much of the planet's water tables and ecosystems.

As one of the early fronts of the current conflict, Atraken has been plagued by warfare for almost a year now. Its distant location from the Corellian Trade Spine hampered Republic resupply efforts for the clone troopers stationed there, but the recent push of Operation Katabatic has turned the tide, allowing for the conquering of the Separatist droid armies.

Though a tactical victory in denying the Separatists access to the valuable shipbuilding ore, the Battle of Atraken has spelled tragedy for the one million inhabitants of the colony world. An estimated 90 percent of the planet's population has been poisoned, displaced, or killed in the fighting. Those who can afford to have fled to neighboring worlds, while others are believed to have sought refuge on Trilos, the only Atraken moon with a breathable atmosphere.

"Sadly, Atraken will never be rebuilt. But the lives of those families torn apart by the brutality of war can still be salvaged," said Kaysil Verwood, RRM Spokesbeing.

RRM transport craft are currently awaiting the clearing of an orbital minefield to examine refugee settlements on the Trilos moon.

SECTOR RANGERS TO CRACK DOWN ON RATION FRAUD

JUDICIAL ARCOLOGY, CORUSCANT-The Republic Office of Criminal Investigation has tasked the Sector Rangers with rooting out ration fraud and enforcing the Victory Rationing Orders and Regulation Plan.

When the war began a year ago, the General Ministry announced the VRORP to help preserve vital materiel for the war effort and to slow spiraling inflation of the Republic credit standard. One of the first side effects was a sudden surge in counterfeiting in relation to starship fuel authorization markers. The ration plan limits the amount of fuel and power replenishment available to private craft.

'There are those unscrupulous individuals who are attempting to take advantage of a distracted Republic," said Price Administrator Kachariss Weng. "We will not turn a blind eye to this. Every erg of energy illegally obtained may as well have been handed over to charge the weapons Count Dooku has pointed at us."

The fuel authorization markers come in six different classes. The most popular ones to be counterfeited are the T- and E-markers, permits set aside for authorized transport and emergency vessels. Unlicensed freighter operators, smugglers, and private craft have been found sporting fake markers. Weng provided no comment when asked whether she thought organized crime was behind the counterfeiting.

With the Jedi Order engaged in the fighting of the war, policing and enforcing ration regulations has fallen to the Sector Rangers. Use of counterfeit markers is a Class Three Infraction, carrying with it immediate impoundment of a vessel, a 5,000-credit fine, up to two years imprisonment, and possible loss of business or flight certification.

Republic Commando – *The Prosecutor*

Almost a year after the Battle of Geonosis, an *Acclamator I*-class assault ship — the Prosecutor, under the command of Captain Martz — goes missing whilst on patrol in the Corellian sector. After two weeks of no contact, the *Prosecutor*, Delta Squad's first home, appears in the Chaykin cluster near the Corbantis system, but doesn't respond to any contact attempts. 367 days after the start of the Clone Wars, Delta Squad is dispatched to investigate, and after a briefing in a CR25 troop carrier, enter the ship via a 0-gravity jump to proton torpedo tubes. Each squad member was individually sent to each of the four ship's data cores to retrieve critical information. Advisor notifies Boss that his primary objective is to retrieve the flight recorder data from the aft data core, then rendezvous with the squad, but as squad leader, he's to assist the other members of the squad if necessary. Sev is tasked with retrieving the sensor logs from the starboard data core, Fixer is to retrieve certain data from the port core. As Advisor finishes telling Boss of Fixer's objective, a static jamming interferes with the transmission, and contact is lost with command. Delta Squad decides to press on with their objectives, without the assistance of Advisor. Because the airlock to the ship has been destroyed, Boss must manually open the torpedo bay hatch to gain access to the ship.

Then after manually opening the torpedo bay hatch, he enters the ship encountering mynocks. As he walks the torpedo bay's corridors, Delta 62 reports strange static of his visor, then being attacked by a droid. After that, he doesn't respond to any of squad members. As players continues, he meets one confused clone trooper, hiding in the torpedo bay, which is killed by a

scavenger droid. Continuing through ship's maintenance hatches, Boss experiences an attack by one of the scavenger droids himself. He realizes what happened to Scorch and warns the other squad members to stay out of static and be aware of these droids. When he reaches a hallway leading to his objective, he finds it blocked by debris. Sev informs him the only way around is through the droid maintenance hatch, passing nearby the starboard data core. While Boss overrides the entrance, he's attacked by three more scavenger droids. As he exits the maintenance hatch by Sev's position in the core, he watches his squad-mate being attacked and knocked unconscious by a Trandoshan slaver, while he's getting ambushed by the Trandoshans as well. Then he enters another maintenance hatch and moves through the hallways to do Sev's work first, encountering Trandoshans equipped with Accelerated Charged Particle Array Guns, but mistakes them for projectile weapons. He enters the core, but is unable to locate Sev. He slices a console while being under enemy fire. After downloading the data he enters a hallway connecting two data cores and heads to the aft data core, his previous task.

Trooper: *"Ah, one of the deluxe models. Come to save us with your 'superior' training?"*

Boss: *"This 'deluxe model' is the only thing standing between you and a bloody death, so you'd best be showing some respect, trooper"*

Trooper: *"Yes sir! What are your orders, sir?"*

Boss: *"Hold the line. Kill any lizards you see. I'm going to get to the bottom of this."*

On his way to his objective, the Boss comes across a clone trooper and two other clones successfully fighting the Trandoshans with help of the defense autoturrets. As he reaches the entrance to the data core, he's attacked by a sliced pair of turrets, however another two turrets are inactive and he uses them to cover his back and enters the aft data core. After a successful slice, he heads to the rendezvous point through the ship's landing gear section. As he navigates a variety of corridors and hallways, Boss encounters a heavily armed Trandoshan, a Trandoshan Elite, carrying a LS-150 Heavy Accelerated Charged Particle Repeater Gun. Reaching the rendezvous point, player finds a junction door he needs to pass locked. However, Delta 40 appears on the other side of this door and unlocks the door. While Fixer is slicing, a Trandoshan slaver breaches a wall behind Boss and brings in a droid dispenser. When Fixer unlocks the door and Boss is good to go, he advises to player to leave the dispenser alone and escape, however it's players choice whether to blow the dispenser up or not.

Now in two, Deltas 38 and 40 go to find their incapacitated squad-mates and complete their objectives. As they navigate the hallways, they find Sev being held by a group of Trandoshan slavers and brutally interrogated. Then they enter the room, killing all enemies and revive Sev with the field bacta dispenser. After Delta 07 acknowledges squad about Scorch probably being held in the detention area, they head there to rescue him. When they get there, they get ambushed and after killing all the enemies in their area, they locate Delta 62 in one of the detention cells. After reviving him, the enemy battle droids blow up a barricade on the other side of the detention block, clearing the way which delta squad uses to advance to the ship's bridge. Navigating the hallways, deltas encounter more reprogrammed turrets. As they reach the bridge, they find it well defended by super battle droids and Trandoshans. After eliminating the droid presence, they locate and destroy a jamming device, blocking their communications with command and re-establishing the link with Advisor. Deltas sending him the data, Advisor is surprised by the amount of data retrieved by commandos, as they contain many Trandoshan and Separatist sensitive information, like tactics and so, so many that it could take months of analyzing to process them all. After receiving the data, Advisor finds out the Trandoshans stole the ship to sell it to the Confederacy of Independent Systems and get some of their battle droids in return. Since the jamming device is offline, Advisor is able to provide a full scan of the ship that indicates a Trandoshan dropship located in hangar A. Delta Squad is now tasked to destroy that ship to wipe out Trandoshan presence in the ship. On a booby trapped elevator on their way to the hangars, Delta Squad gets stuck in the detention area and ambushed by Trandoshans. Their only hope surviving in the detention block full of Trandoshan slavers and mercenaries is now the automated lockdown system, but it has been damaged by Trandoshans. To make it functioning, Deltas navigate the detention block and fix four damaged circuits, encountering a Trandoshan Rocket Turret. While they fight the Trandoshans, Fixer picks up multiple clone trooper signatures coming from below their position. Advisor tells them not to be distracted and investigates it himself. Shortly after the lockdown kicked in, a poison gas started to flow in the hallways, dealing with all remaining Trandoshans in this level instantly. Then Delta Squad moves through a maintenance hatch to a room full of dead clone trooper bodies that have apparently been carried here by scavenger droids. As they leave the room, they get past Trandoshan mines and reprogrammed autoturrets (whether by destroying them or by reprogramming them back on the player's side). Then they proceed to the hangar and the Trandoshan dropship.

As members of Delta Squad arrive to the hangar A, they encounter the Trandoshan dropship barricaded by debris and guarded heavily by remaining Trandoshans, mines and two rocket turrets. As the dropship is heavily shielded, Advisor informs Deltas that they have to control both turrets to destroy the dropship. While they fight, Advisor picks up a Confederacy *Lucrehulk*-class battleship on long range sensors and contacts the Coruscant command for backup. After a tough fight, they take over the turrets and blow up the dropship, destroying the Trandoshan base on the ship and wiping out their presence. In the time while they recover from the fight with Trandoshans, the *Lucrehulk*-class battleship jumps out of hyperspace and starts to send battle droid dispensers to the other three hangars to take over the ship. Advisor realizes they can't wait for help from Coruscant and starts sending an emergency signal to any Republic ship near the Corbantis system. After few moments of no response, when the hope seems to be lost, Captain Talbot of the RAS *Arrestor* responds and sets his ship's course to Delta Squad's position to help. Delta Squad therefore proceeds to the hangar B to fend off the dispensers. As they enter the hangar, they acquire defensive positions and await incoming attack. When the first two dispensers land on the hangar's floor and start to deploy battle droids, Advisor finds a way to seal the hangar and stop the incoming dispensers by blowing up the hangar's force field regulator. As the squad members do so, they continue to the next hangar via the maintenance tunnels, where two dispensers are already deployed and more on their way. After defending this hangar and destroying its force field, the Deltas proceed to the last hangar, hangar D, where the droids are fully deployed and start to spread out throughout the ship. As they arrive to the hangar, Advisor acknowledges the squad of useful ordnance that he can get to them via the lift in back of the hangar and commands them to set up defensive positions and since he can't remotely manipulate the lift, one of Deltas has to override the nearby console. As they do so, an AT-TE walker comes up on the lift. Boss then mounts the walker's main turret and takes out the force field regulator and all the droids with their dispensers in the hangar as well. As the commander of the *Lucrehulk*-class battleship realizes there's no hope taking over the ship by sending battle droids and the force fields are up, he decides to take aim and fire.

When Delta Squad realizes the ship won't stand long defenseless against the larger Separatist battleship, Advisor leads them to the turbolaser control room to return the fire. Fighting countless hordes of battle droids and their own reprogrammed defense turrets, Delta Squad arrives to the designated control room and is tasked slicing three terminals to program all turbolaser batteries

to attack the largest enemy target in range. While the Deltas are slicing and fending off many droids, Captain Talbot with his ship, RAS *Arrestor* arrives at the location and opens fire on the separatist ship. Shortly after that, Deltas manage to turn on their own weapon systems and together, with the firepower of two *Acclamators* they defeat the Separatist battleship. As the droid remote controls are destroyed with the ship, all enemy droids within the *Prosecutor* are deactivated and the ship is finally secure

The Hive

Chapter 1

G'Mai Duris, Regent of the planet Ord Cestus, formally folded the fingers of her primary and secondary hands. She was an X'Ting, of segmented, oval, dull gold body and gentle manner, one of the insectoids who had once ruled this planet. Before the coming of Cestus Cybernetics, X'Ting hives had thronged this world, but now the soulless industrial giant not only dominated the planet but also threatened the safety of the Republic itself.

Obi-Wan Kenobi watched as Duris prepared to address the hive council, the last humble remnant of X'Ting power. Like the offworlder capital of Chikatlik, some hundreds of meters above their heads, the council room was nestled in a natural lava bubble. The walls of the egg-shaped, fifteen-meter-high chamber had been glazed burnt sienna, but most of that original color was covered with handwoven tapestries. Three doorways, each guarded by two members of the X'Ting warrior clans, led out of the room—one to the surface, the others to deeper, less traveled places within the hive.

The twelve councilors seated at the curved stone table were a mix of relatively youthful X'Ting, their carapaces still brilliant, and elders showing gray and white splotches amid their bristling thoracic hair. Their vestigial wings fluttered in distress. From time to time their primary or secondary hands would smooth their ivory ceremonial robes. Every red or green faceted eye studied her carefully; every auditory antenna was tuned to her words.

Duris hunched her thorax and cleared her throat, perhaps gathering her thoughts. She was almost as tall as Obi-Wan, and her broad, segmented, pale gold shell and swollen egg sac gave her considerable gravitas.

At this moment, G'Mai Duris needed every bit of it.

"My peers and elders, " she said. "My dear friend Master Kenobi has told me an astonishing thing. For centuries we have known that our ancestors were cheated out of their land-land purchased with worthless baubles we believed were legal tender.

"For years we had no means of redress, save to accept whatever sops Cestus Cybernetics threw our way. But that has changed. " Her eyes gleamed like cut emeralds. "Master Kenobi brought with him one of Coruscant's finest barristers, a Vippit who knows their laws well. And according to the central authority, if we should choose to press our suit, we can destroy Cestus Cybernetics. If we own the land beneath their factories, we can charge them whatever we wish for land usage, possibly even take the facilities themselves. "

"What? " exclaimed Kosta, the council's eldest member. All X'Ting cycled between the male and female genders every three years, and Kosta was currently female. Although too old for egg bearing, her sac was still swollen to impressive size. She looked shocked. "Is this true? "

"You would do nothing except destroy the planet! " Caiza Quill sputtered. Only minutes earlier Duris had deposed him as head of the council. His rage and surrender pheromones still spiced the air. "Destroy Cestus Cybernetics, and you destroy our economy! "

Kosta's expression bristled with naked contempt for Quill's transparent half-truths. "The hive was here before Cestus Cybernetics. It is not the hive that will suffer if this company changes hands . .

. or even if it dies. It will be those who have sold themselves to offworlders for a promise of power. "

"But my lords, " Duris said, drawing their attention back to her once again. "I have obligations to the offworlders, people who came to Cestus with skills and heart, wanting only to build a life here. We cannot use this opportunity to destroy. We must use it to build, and heal. "

The X'Ting hive council members nodded, perhaps pleased by her empathy. Although she was new to their ranks, they seemed satisfied with her grasp of the responsibilities.

But Quill was in no way mollified by her words. His stubby wings quivered with rage. "You have won nothing, Duris! I will block you, I swear. Regardless of what you think you have, what you think you know . . . this isn't over yet. " He stormed out, humiliated and enraged.

Obi-Wan had watched the proceedings, withholding comment, but now he had to speak. "Can he do that? "

"Perhaps, " Kosta replied. "Any member of the Families can veto any specific business deal. " She was referring to the Five Families, who ran the mines and factories that fed the droid works. Once there had only been four, but Quill had wormed his way into their midst by delivering labor contracts and quelling dissent, selling out his own people in the process. "If he believes it is in his best interest, or just for the sake of hatred, he will try. " An alarming thought seemed to occur to her. "He might try to keep you from sending the Supreme Chancellor this information. Perhaps you should send it immediately. "

Reluctantly, Obi-Wan shook his head. "The Chancellor will use it as legal pretext to shut down Cestus Cybernetics. In that case, no one wins. Your best bet is to use this information as emergency leverage. "

Only days before, Obi-Wan had arrived on Cestus to stop the planet from selling its deadly bio-droids to the Confederacy. By means of a unique "living circuit" design, the droid works had created a machine that could actually anticipate an attacker's moves. Understanding their potential, Count Dooku had ordered thousands of the devices-originally designed for small-scale security work-with every intention of converting them to battle droids.

The thought of such an army, marching in the thousands, chilled Obi-Wan's blood. In the face of such a juggernaut, both the Jedi and the Grand Army of the Republic might fall. The spread of such lethal devices must be stopped at all costs!

The favored means of deterrence was negotiation, but bombardment was not out of the question. Initial contacts had not been promising: Cestus Cybernetics was loath to cease production of such a valuable commodity, and believed Chancellor Palpatine would never order the destruction of a peaceful planet selling a legal product. With the X'Ting as allies, Obi-Wan's assignment would be far simpler.

Over the last days he had gained the trust of G'Mai Duris, Cestus's puppet Regent, and taken the first steps to furnish her with real political authority. If he could win over the hive council, as well, there might be serious cause for optimism.

The council members listened to him speak of politics and finances, swiftly comprehending the reasons it might profit them to side with Coruscant. But after expressing confidence in his assessment, they swiftly changed the subject. "There is another matter to discuss, Master Jedi. "

He glanced at Duris, seeking a clue about the new concern. The Regent turned to face him, moving one portion of her segmented body at a time. Her primary and secondary arms spread, empty palms extended, X'Ting body language indicating confusion. "I know nothing of this, " she said.

Kosta drummed the fingers of her secondary hands against the table. She consulted with the other members of the council, speaking in clicks and pops, and then addressed Obi-Wan. "It is possible, Master Jedi, that you can perform a great service for us this day. "

"In what fashion? " he asked.

Again the council members glanced at one another, as if measuring the wisdom of speech. Then, after a brief conference, Kosta began.

"There is one other way that Quill might hurt us, if he decides that the hive is no longer deserving of his loyalty. "

That was a possibility. Certainly, Quill's addiction to power and naked self-interest might trigger betrayal.

Obi-Wan felt an emotional charge building in the chamber. He knew that sense: fear of approaching a threshold. The hive council was about to do something that could make the X'Ting deeply vulnerable.

Kosta continued. "What we are about to tell you is known only to members of the council, and to elite members of the hive's warrior clan. Even G'Mai Duris did not know this, although her partner, Filian, did. " She bowed respectfully. "Filian was forced to conceal this knowledge from you, by oath. "

It was clear this revelation was painful to Duris. Until now, she had clung to the illusion that she had known her deceased mate completely. "What is it? "

"There is much about the history of our planet that you could not know, Master Jedi. Much that is not in the fabled archives of Coruscant. "

"Regrettable, but always true, " Obi-Wan said. "Please illuminate. "

"Once, " Kosta explained, "the hive was strong. We had defeated the spider people in a great war, and brought the entire planet under the rule of the hive and our queen, who was wise and just. We believed that it was time for us to enter the galactic community. But this was not merely a matter of gaining political recognition. We coveted the role of trading partner, but what resources might we offer to become so?

"What products could we produce? What minerals might we have? We searched, and found nothing that was not available on worlds nearer the galaxy's central hub. Nothing that would give us the advantage we sought.

"Then we heard a rumor that Coruscant was planning to expand its prison system, and was looking for host worlds on the Rim that might be willing to lease or sell land for such facilities. Land was one thing Cestus had in plenty, and it seemed an admirable opportunity. Overtures were made, and we won a contract. "

She sighed. "At first, all seemed well. Several facilities were constructed, and the scum of the galaxy were safely quartered in reconstructed caverns beneath our sands. "

All of this Obi-Wan knew, of course.

"Once the deal was struck, we swallowed our pride and accepted a position on the Republic's bottom rung. Many of our workers were hired for the mines and factories. We learned to negotiate, so that future leasings and sales were more favorable. We were paid our rental fees, with which we hired surveyors to more carefully examine our resources with a mind to expanding trade.

"Then something completely unexpected happened. Executives from Cybot Galactica were convicted of fraud and gross negligence and sentenced to prison here. These former beings of power were forced to dig in the depths of

the caverns. Some of the work was useful: enlarging their living spaces, building shops and offices. Some of it was mere make-work, the time-honored prison task of turning big rocks into little ones. But during the digging, the executives discovered minerals used in advanced droid fabrication. A treasure, floating unsuspected in the Outer Rim!

"The executives hatched a plan to free themselves. In meetings with the prison authorities, they proposed to make the guards and warden wealthy beyond their dreams. The essence of the proposal was that the pooled talents and contacts of the various prisoners might well create an endless stream of first-class droids. Here on Ord Cestus there was labor aplenty, mountains of raw material, skill, and savvy. They needed only permission.

"The deal was struck, the stage set for the creation of Cestus Cybernetics. The executives put out the word to former customers and employees, and immigration to Ord Cestus began in earnest. The first factory was in operation within a standard year, producing a modest repair droid that received favorable reviews and respectable orders. They were up and running. "

Kosta raised her voice. "But as the fledgling company grew in power and wealth, it came into conflict with the queen and king. First, managers purchased additional land with worthless synthetic gems. The royals were forced to swallow this humiliation, but they did attempt to negotiate larger shares of wealth for the hive, for the education of our people, for healthcare. "

"Healthcare? "

"A necessity. Since the founding of the prison there had been numerous strange and damaging ailments spreading through our population. The inmates, from every corner of the galaxy, brought countless diseases with them, creating wave after wave of illness. We sickened by the thousands.

"The negotiations were fierce. Our rulers threatened to withhold X'Ting labor and to refuse to allow Cestus Cybernetics to expand its mining operation.

"Then the Great Plague hit us. " Kosta leaned forward, emerald eyes gleaming. "I know that it cannot be proved, but we knew, knew that this plague was no accident. It was unleashed upon us to destroy the royal family, to splinter the hive so that there would be no effective opposition. Perhaps even to exterminate us. "

Obi-Wan flinched at the passion in those words. Was such villainy possible? Foolish to ask: of course it was. Coruscant knew little of what happened on the Outer Rim. And since Cestus Cybernetics controlled the official information stream, any conceivable perfidy might have been concealed.

"And this genocide almost worked. But as the plague swept through the hive, a frantic plan was put into action: to place several healthy eggs in suspended animation and to hide them in a special vault deep below Cestus's surface, where only a chosen few would know the truth, the path, and the method of opening.

"The vault was constructed by Toong'I Security Systems-a company in competition with Cestus Cybernetics, and known to be trustworthy. The workers were blind-shuttled to the site and never knew the location. When it was completed, we knew that whatever happened to the rest of the royals, there would be at least one fertilized egg pair that was safe-royals, who could mate and create a new line. "

Instantly, Obi-Wan grasped the significance. After the plague, the surviving X'Ting had scattered across the surface of Ord Cestus. But a new royal line might draw them back together again, unite them. G'Mai Duris was but Regent, holding the power until the return of a new royal pair. Under her capable hands the power transfer might rejuvenate this unhappy planet. A promising idea!

Obi-Wan organized his thoughts carefully, and then spoke. "So . .

. with this news about the ownership of the land beneath Cestus Cybernetics, a pair of royals to unite the planet might give you greater voice on Coruscant, and build your people a better future? "

"Yes, " Kosta agreed, eyes sparkling. "There are problems, though. First, the plague was deadlier than we expected. After the royals died, several X'Ting clans chose to stay deep below the surface, to seal off all contact with offworlders. They became almost a separate hive: there has been virtually no contact with those clans for a century. Worse still, every X'Ting who knew the secret of the vault died in the plague. All that remain are keys to open the outer door. Lastly, Toong'I Security Systems was destroyed when its planet was

struck by a comet. Its leaders might have told us how to open the vault, but . . .
" Kosta made a resigned shrugging motion.

Obi-Wan squinted. "But certainly you can still use other means to retrieve the eggs. "

The old X'Ting female sighed, nervously knotting the fingers of primary and secondary hands. "You don't understand the status of royals. By breeding and culture, every X'Ting must obey them. It is our way, and it is in our blood. Therefore, they are both the greatest treasure, and the greatest threat. An X'Ting royal pair in the hands of Cestus Cybernetics would reduce every X'Ting on this planet to slavery. Rather than have that happen, a tamper detector was built into the vault. We are not certain as to its details, but we have reason to believe that after three unsuccessful attempts to open the chamber, the eggs will be destroyed. "

By the stars! These people had been so desperate?

"So..." he began cautiously. "What service do you wish of me? "

"Twice in the past we tried to regain the precious eggs. Twice our bravest have tried to reach the vault. Twice they perished before they could reach it. " A pause. "There is a story whispered among our people. It is said that a hundred and fifty years ago a visitor came from the center of the galaxy. A warrior with powers beyond any the X'Ting had ever seen. He called himself a Jedi. It is said his courage and wisdom saved our people. I think it no mere coincidence that now, in our hour of need, another Jedi has appeared. "

Obi-Wan felt a thrill of alarm. He had not anticipated such a situation.
"Madam, " he said, "it is a great weight you wish me to carry. "

"We believe you capable of withstanding it. "

He had heard no story in the Jedi archives about a visit to Ord Cestus, but it was certainly possible. Many Jedi avoided acclaim; they were capable of stunning feats of valor, followed by such modesty that they might decline even to give their names. "And you fear that Quill, angry with the Regent, might betray these secret eggs to the Five Families. And that they might launch their own effort to recover them, and use them against you. "

"You see our situation, yes. "

He did. Coruscant wanted something: the cessation of droid production. The X'Ting, indeed all beings on this planet, were more or less dependent on a continued income stream from Cestus Cybernetics. Obi-Wan was asking them to side with him, to trust him. He had thought to do this through diplomacy, but providence had given him a means of winning their trust more directly, had he sufficient courage. "I accept your request. I will attempt to recover your eggs, " he said.

Kosta sighed in relief. "You will need a guide. A small cluster of X'Ting warriors have studied the original maps through the deep hive. Originally there were five broodmates. Only one survives. " She turned to the others. "Call Jesson. "

The council members leaned their heads together, touching antennae as they buzzed and clicked in X'Tingian. After a few moments a small male left the table and scuttled off into a side tunnel.

"G'Mai, I am in your hands, " Obi-Wan said quietly. The elders had carried themselves well, but the Regent was the only X'Ting he could claim to know. If anyone here could be relied upon for full disclosure, it was she. "Is there anything else that I should know before setting out on this mission? "

"Jedi, " Duris said. "I know only the whispered rumors about the visit of a Jedi Master. I'd never heard of the royal eggs before this day. "

The council members turned as the small male councilor returned. Behind him, in a gray tunic with a diagonal red stripe, marched a larger male bristling with red thoracic fur. His red, faceted eyes took in the entire room at a glance, scanning Obi-Wan and making an instant, positive threat assessment. The newcomer's primary and secondary arms bore numerous pale scars: this was an experienced warrior, probably a member of some elite hive security unit. A triple-sectioned staff hewn of some clear material lay diagonally across his back.

The newcomer put the palms of his primary and secondary hands together, then spoke in a series of clicks and pops.

Kosta raised her left primary hand. "It is requested that you speak in Basic when in this human's presence. "

The X'Ting soldier turned to regard Obi-Wan. His first scan had taken a fraction of a second. The second took longer, long enough for Obi-Wan to sense the intense disdain in the X'Ting's eyes. "My pardon to our honored guest. My words were: 'First Rank Jesson is present and ready for duty. ' "

"I should go with you, " Duris offered. "This is my job, my planet. If we fail, and Quill betrays us, we are all undone. "

"But you are your people's leader, " Obi-Wan said. "You are needed here. "

Duris protested, but the other council members voted her down. She seemed as distressed as Obi-Wan had ever seen. "You came here as a friend, and helped me more than words can say, " she said, taking his two hands in her four. "I hope that I have not brought you to your death. "

"Jedi are not so easily killed, " he said.

"If you are half the warrior Master Yoda is said to be, you will prevail, " she said.

Jesson's eyes narrowed at that. If Obi-Wan had felt more confident in reading X'Ting facial expressions, he would have said the soldier's dominating mood was one of contempt.

"Well, let us begin. " Obi-Wan turned to his guide. "We descend into the bowels of the planet together, " he said. "Will you tell me your full name? "

"First Rank Jesson Di Blinth, " the other said, and bowed formally. "Of the volcano Di Blinths. "

"Well met, Jesson, " the Jedi replied. "Obi-Wan Kenobi, of Coruscant. Are we ready to leave? "

Jesson conferred swiftly with the other members of the council. Two members touched scent glands at the sides of their neck, and with damp fingers made a series of dots on the table before them. Jesson made moist markings of his own in a similar fashion.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow, and Duris explained: "Much of our information is stored in scents. "

"These contain most of what we currently know or remember about the path, " Kosta said. "No one has taken it in so long . . . "

"I thought you said that four of your number tried, and were slain in the process, " Obi-Wan said.

"Not completely accurate, " Jesson said, studying the tabletop. "The first attempt was through the direct opening to the egg chamber, which buttresses a lava tube. My brother never returned, and we know that defensive mechanisms were triggered. A backup entrance was tried next. My second brother never returned, and the door was jammed. "

"Did you attempt to open it? "

Jesson regarded him with scorn. "Whatever happened there cost the life of a brave warrior. We will not disrespect him by assuming we can succeed where he failed. "

"What, then? "

"There is another way down, through the old tunnels. "

The mention of that word quieted the room for a long moment, and again G'Mai Duris raised an objection. "I should go. Obi-Wan risks his life because of me. "

"Later, perhaps, when you have shifted back to male, " Kosta said, her emerald eyes flashing with compassion. "But now you are not as strong and light as you will be. We cannot risk you. You are our face with the offworlders. "

Duris took Obi-Wan's hands in hers. "Then go with luck, " she said.

Obi-Wan nodded. "The Force is what we will need. " He turned to Jesson. "Well, if it is to be done, it is best done swiftly. "

And together they left the chamber.

Chapter 2

Above them stood Ord Cestus's capital city of ChikatLik, a metropolis of six million citizens built into a natural lava bubble modified by the hive. The bubble's natural gray glaze was a rainbow of reflected colors from the city lights and holoboard. ChikatLik boasted the architecture of a hundred cultures, was a forest of twisting spires and elevated tramways, airways filled with droid shuttles, taxis, personal transportation and trams of all kinds. The bubble walls concealed a network of transport systems within the ground itself: subways and magrails and lev tracks, technological wonders ferrying workers, executives, ore, and equipment.

But down here, far below ChikatLik's streets, there was only the hive. Generations of hive builders had chewed and burrowed through the ground. The texture of the walls had a chewed duracrete appearance that Obi-Wan had noted elsewhere in ChikatLik, clear evidence of X'Ting construction.

Down in the lowest tunnels the walls were coated with rectangular patches of manicured white fungus that emitted a steady bluish glow. "Is this your form of illumination?" Obi-Wan asked.

Jesson nodded. "The fungus is well maintained here, fed and trimmed. Farther back it grows wild, and the fungus eats into the walls, slowly widening the tunnels. "

The fungus had etched the rock until it seemed like the surface of some ancient sculpture. Obi-Wan ran his fingers over it as they walked, felt that he was reading an ancient book of X'Ting secret history. "How many outsiders have been here?" he asked.

"You are the first," Jesson told him.

Obi-Wan sighed. Jesson's tone had been flat and cold. He and the X'Ting would have to come to an understanding, but he hoped to delay it until they had spent a bit more time together. "Where does this come out?"

Jesson turned to him, sneering. "Listen, Jedi. I will follow my orders and take you along with me, but I don't have to like it. You offworlders ruined our planet. You cheated and brainwashed us and corrupted our leaders-

"If you're thinking of Quill, I believe he's been removed from the council. "

"And replaced with Duris, " Jesson said. "I doubt she's much better. "

"If you think so little of your leaders, why do you obey them? "

Jesson drew himself up to full height. "I obey my training, and the rules of my clan. I am loyal to the hive, not merely the council. And now the council wishes the return of the royals. This I will help them do. " His wings fluttered a bit. In the glow of the fungus they seemed like sheets of pale blue ice. "Make no mistake, Jedi. I will take you with me. But fantasies about your great powers won't save you in the deep hive. Maybe Duris believes that some sorcerer from Coruscant once saved the poor ignorant X'Ting, but I am no mewling grub, to believe such tales. "

"Fair enough, " Obi-Wan said as they continued down the tunnel. "I'd never heard of it myself, so I'm not asking you to believe. "

Jesson shrugged, although he seemed satisfied that Obi-Wan was not trying to convince him. "It is typical for a colonized people to identify with their oppressors. This yearning for an alien rescuer is pitiable. It is hive-hatred. "

Obi-Wan was about to speak when Jesson raised his primary arms. "Be very quiet. " The X'Ting brushed past a curtain of hanging moss. Curiously, once on the other side Obi-Wan heard a steady droning sound. The moss seemed to have functioned as some kind of damper.

Then Obi-Wan gasped. He felt he had walked into a fantasy realm, where gravity itself was suspended.

Hanging from the ceiling was a series of swollen blue spheres attached as if by an invisible adhesive. No legs or arms or anything resembling faces were visible. He reckoned that these creatures were the same species as Regent Duris's assistant Shar Shar, but much larger. They were vaguely translucent, with thin blue veins. By the dim fungal light he could see organs pulsing slowly, as well as some kind of distended stomach or bladder.

"What are these creatures? " Obi-Wan asked.

"Their species are Zeetsa. We feed them, and they produce a food called Lifemilk. Once our people depended upon them, and we lived together. But over time they developed more mind and will. Those who wish to join our society are allowed to do so, while those who choose a more peaceful, quiet existence can have that, as well. "

He sighed, and for a moment seemed to forget his antipathy toward Obi-Wan. "Lifemilk is a great delicacy. " He turned to the Jedi. "As an offworlder, you can afford it more readily than most X'Ting. "

The bluish surfaces of the Lifemilk creatures gave off a calming, peaceful radiance, but even had Jesson been more sanguine, Obi-Wan would not have chosen to sample at this time. One never knew the effects of alien foods, even benign, and he had to rely upon all of his senses in the coming hours.

The room was warm, almost uncomfortably so, and Obi-Wan swiftly determined that the heat emanated from the many bodies crowded together.

As he watched, the smooth surface of one of the globes began to roil. A bulge recognizable as a nose appeared, followed by two eyeholes, emerging from the surface almost like a creature floating up through a pool of oil. Obi-Wan blinked, startled, as similar faces grew on two of the other spheres. Generalized faces, something between an X'Ting and a human, almost as if the Zeetsa had no real form of its own, instead borrowing appearance from its neighbors.

The three spheres with faces pivoted to watch the intruders who had awakened them from their long, productive slumber.

He heard something gurgle in the room, and thought that it was the Zeetsa version of speech. They were speaking to each other, wondering, perhaps, who this offworlder was . . .

No . . . not who, but what. If Jesson was accurate, no other offworlder had ever come this way, and that meant that in all probability they had never seen a human being at all.

The room was the size of a star cruiser docking bay: immense, and silent save for that constant murmuring. Obi-Wan had the feeling he was walking through a room of sleeping children, except for the disquieting faces that appeared on

the smooth surface of the dangling, gravity-defying bulbs. One of them formed lips and a recognizable mouth, and he stopped for a moment, transfixed. As he watched, his own face appeared, complete with beard, etched into the surface of the blue sphere.

And then the corners of the mouth lifted. "It's trying to communicate, " he whispered, astonished.

"It is dreaming, " Jesson said. "And you are a part of the dream. "

The bulb pivoted to follow them as they reached the far side of the cavern. The tunnel there was darker than the Lifemilk creatures' place of resting, and Obi-Wan took that final image, the smile of a sleeping, mindless creature, with him into the darkness.

Chapter 3

The tunnel leading away from the Zeetsa chamber was narrower. If he had wished, Obi-Wan could have scooped blue-white fungus off both walls with his elbows as they walked. The mold here grew in wild patches, some of them slippery splotches underfoot, slick enough to make an unwary explorer turn an ankle. The wild moss gave a fainter light here, and from time to time Jesson used a glowlight to lead the way. The air itself felt musty and close. Obi-Wan guessed no one had been here for years.

"Where are we now? " he asked.

"Beyond where I have gone, " Jesson replied. "But I know what lies ahead. "

"And that is? "

"The Hall of Heroes, " Jesson said. "This is where the greatest leaders of our people were honored, long ago, before the clans split after the plague. In that world, every warrior strove to perform great service for the hive, that his image might one day appear in the hall. "

"And what of the people who remained down there? " Obi-Wan asked.

"They are the true X'Ting, " he said, a hint of pride entering his voice for the first time. "Perhaps when this is over, I will stay with them. It is said they believe we 'surface' X'Ting have forgotten the old ways. This is truth. "

"Will they try to stop us? "

"I think not. They, even more than those on the surface, have awaited the return of the royals. In fact, " he added, "once we have opened the vault, I can think of no safer hands in which to place the eggs. "

Obi-Wan stopped. "The eggs are to be taken to the council, Jesson. "

The X'Ting's eyes sparked. "Yes. Of course. "

Obi-Wan didn't trust that answer. Might Jesson turn the eggs over to the X'Ting who lurked in the lower hive? And if he did, how should he, Obi-Wan, respond?

One step at a time, he thought. They had much to overcome before that became an issue.

The tunnel came to an end at a massive metal door, bolted and barred, and so rusted that it seemed almost a part of the natural wall.

Jesson traced his hands over its surface. "This is the back way into the vault. We must go through the Hall of Heroes, where the old X'Ting still live. Many years ago they erected this door to seal out the plague. To seal us out of their lives. " He looked back at Obi-Wan. "We will have to open the door. "

"This I can do, " Obi-Wan said. He drew his lightsaber and triggered its emerald beam. Then he took a deep breath and slowly began to press his blade into the door. The hissing sound filled the darkness. Liquid metal sizzled into steam. Within a few moments he'd burned a fist-size hole in the door. Obi-Wan stopped and peered through. Nothing but darkness beyond. He listened. Nothing.

No. Not nothing. Something scuttled on the other side of the door. But it was something distant. Claws on metal and stone. Other than that, silence.

The fingers of Jesson's secondary arms twined with tension.

"Is there anything you're not telling me? " Obi-Wan asked.

"There are stories, " Jesson admitted. "Five years ago when we tried to free the eggs, one of my brothers went through another opening. I know he made it as far as the Hall of Heroes. But after that . . . " He shrugged. "We lost communication. "

"I see. " Obi-Wan didn't like the sound of that. It could imply entirely too many things.

He widened the hole, then waited for the metal to cool so that they could wiggle through. "I'll go first, " he said. The mold in the next chamber was just barely bright enough to reveal a large empty space with a rock floor. The room was perhaps twenty meters across, with gently convex walls. "Looks clear, " he said, and then slipped through, instantly alert.

By the glow of his lightsaber he saw that the floor of the roughly spherical chamber was of level stone. In the center was a descending stone stairway. Obi-Wan supposed that it led to another chamber below them.

Jesson crawled through the burned hole nimbly and stood, holding up his glowlight.

"You've never been in here? " Obi-Wan asked.

"Never. And neither has any living member of the upper hive, " he said. "I believe we are now inside the largest statue in the X'Ting Hall of Heroes. "

They began down the stairs, turning in a spiral as they descended around a single rock column in the midst of a chamber hewn from stone. Hewn? Chewed, Obi-Wan thought.

"Something is wrong, " Jesson said. Caution had crept into the X'Ting warrior's voice.

"What? "

"I smell much death, " he said.

The silence itself was so oppressive that it was impossible for Obi-Wan not to agree with him. Something was wrong—he could sense it as well. Halfway down the stairs, Jesson aimed his light at the floor below them.

For a moment Obi-Wan couldn't believe what he was seeing. The entire floor of the chamber was covered with empty, shattered carapaces. Countless heaps of them, scattered about like bones in some large predator's lair.

"What happened here? " Jesson whispered.

"What would you think? "

The exoskeleton fragments, the skulls and legs and chestpieces, seemed to stare back at them, simultaneously mocking and warning. "Either they crawled into here by the thousands and died, or . . . "

"Or what? " Obi-Wan asked.

"Or something dragged them in here. "

Obi-Wan crouched, running his fingers along the broken edges of a carapace. There was no moisture in the remaining flesh at all. This had happened years ago.

He rose and led the way to the descending stone stairway in the room's center. The twisting exit had no guardrails, and it would be a nasty spill if taken unexpectedly. The dusty smell of old, forgotten death rose up to enfold them.

When they reached the bottom, his foot crunched on a leg carapace. "Light, " he said simply, and took it from Jesson's hand.

The carapaces had been cracked open. No withered flesh remained to be seen. Devoured? Everywhere he looked, there was nothing but the cracked, violated exoskeletons of dead X'Ting.

Jesson went to his knees behind Obi-Wan, examining the remains. "I . . . I don't understand, " he said as Obi-Wan returned the glowlight.

Something in his voice chilled the Jedi. "What is it? " Obi-Wan asked.

"Look at these bite marks. "

Obi-Wan inspected. The carapaces had indeed been chewed open, not pried apart with tools. "Yes. Savage. "

"You don't understand, " Jesson said. "These are X'Ting tooth marks. "

And suddenly the horror that had gripped Jesson brushed against Obi-Wan's spine. Here in the depths, where X'Ting had tried to maintain the old ways, something had happened. Clan turning against clan? War? However it had begun, what was clear was the way it had ended:

Cannibalism. These X'Ting had eaten their own. There was no lower behavior, no more loathsome foe. The fear of being slain by an opponent was always present, a natural part of a warrior's life. But the idea of being killed and then devoured . . . that was something different.

"I suggest we keep moving, " he said.

"I agree, " Jesson said, biting at the words. And they continued across the room.

Something moved. Obi-Wan couldn't see it, or hear it—he felt it, a displacement of the air around them, a perturbation in the Force.

"I don't think we're alone, " he said.

Jesson reached for the three-sectioned staff slung across his back. The sections were of clear crystal or acrylic, connected by short lengths of chain. A club and a flail in one, Obi-Wan thought. He hoped the X'Ting used it superbly.

"That door, " Jesson said, indicating an opening on the far side of the room. This room, like the one above it, had a concave wall, but less sharply angled.

"Let us make our way there, " Obi-Wan said. "Swiftly. But I suspect that that is where our company awaits. "

Jesson's lips pulled back from his teeth, displaying small, sharp, multiple rows. Obi-Wan would not care to have his arm caught in those jaws. "Let them come, " the X'Ting said.

Step by step they progressed across the floor. They were almost to the doorway when the air's scent changed. Just a bit, a nose-wrinkling aroma drifting to them on the weakest of breezes. Something that dried tongue and throat, an acid tang reminiscent of stomach gases. Before he could consciously identify the smell, the first glowing eyes appeared. Glittering. Faceted, blinking at them from the darkness.

Then they were under attack.

Jesson dropped his lamp almost at once, and although it didn't extinguish on hitting the ground, the light it gave was slanted and partial. The sparkle of Obi-Wan's lightsaber was more brilliant, increasing with the hum and flash when he met an opponent's weapon or body.

These were X'Ting-the Jedi was sure of that-but X'Ting of a different variety than those he had seen until now. These were not specialized for combat: they were diggers, workers. The oversize jaws implied that they might have been the ones who produced the chewed substance that characterized the hive.

Most of them carried hefty metal pry bars. Weapons? Tools? For whatever purpose they had originally been intended, the bars would crack any bone they struck.

There was no more time for thought. The song of Obi-Wan's lightsaber was long and sour. X'Ting diggers fell before him like scythed grain. They hissed and came on, howling.

Obi-Wan measured his response, allowing them to come to him, then taking the aggressive posture when advantageous. Ferociously fast, the cannibal X'Ting attacked in a frightening wave, simply wading in swinging their metal bars, trusting in numbers to carry the day.

Against a Jedi, that was not enough.

The air around Obi-Wan hissed as his lightsaber swooped and twisted. After the first few moments he had adjusted to the pace and style of attack, and was able to determine a bit more about their adversaries. The first thing he realized was that they were nearly blind from years of groping in darkness, doubtless hunting by smell or hearing. His lightsaber's flare frightened some of them,

freezing them in place, making some hesitant to attack. Those who did not hesitate died hissing their hatred and fear.

Between strokes, between breaths, Obi-Wan spared fragments of attention to see how Jesson was faring.

The X'Ting warrior needed no assistance. He performed with a fearless, aggressive, almost weightless agility, kicking and punching in all directions with all six limbs. His weapon whirled like a propeller, almost invisibly fast. He held the three-sectioned staff first by one end, then by the middle, then by the other, swinging it and twisting it into defensive and attacking positions, and every time he moved, one of his enemies fell to rise no more.

He crouched, sweeping the feet of several creatures from underneath them, and when he came up, Jesson coiled into a ferocious attack position that mimicked a spider stalking the strands of its web.

Their attackers circled them, hissing and coiling as Obi-Wan and Jesson put their backs together and surveyed the horde.

"We can't kill them all, " Jesson said.

"No, " Obi-Wan agreed. "But we don't have to. Follow me! "

Without another word the Jedi plunged into the mass of cannibals, plowing toward the door. He struggled not to think about what would happen to them- or to Jesson, at least-if they were overwhelmed. It was better to stay in the realm of Form III, the lightsaber combat he had practiced for so long. It was better, and no less effective, for one who understood that defense and attack were two sides of the same coin.

Left, right, left-he deflected blows, shattered weapons, and severed limbs in a blinding, dazzling display that singed blazing lines in the darkness. Their enemies, though ferocious, were hampered by their near blindness; only an unnatural hunger drove them forward.

They seemed to be awakening in waves, crawling out of whatever dark holes they had entered. Had these things scavenged in the darkness, on the waste and garbage that every great city produces? Even Coruscant had its ghouls, gangsters and homeless creatures who had abandoned the light to live in the

fissures between social tissues. But the creatures swarming them now matched the worst that great world-city could offer.

"Run! " Jesson called, and they sprinted toward the doorway. The passage narrowed, and it was a bit harder for the cannibals to reach them, making defense that much easier. He could see the stairway now, only a dozen meters farther away.

Obi-Wan whirled 360 degrees; he glimpsed Jesson as he deflected and attacked, his three-sectioned staff cracking heads and sending their enemies scurrying for safety.

But then a mass of wriggling bodies threw themselves at Jesson all at once, and the warrior went down. Obi-Wan arrived just in time to stop a jagged spear from descending into his guide; his lightsaber flashed, leaving the attacker howling with a missing limb. Using the Force to hurl another aside, the Jedi Knight bent swiftly, helping Jesson up from the ground.

He did not know what fear looked like on the face of an X'Ting, but he was fairly certain that that was the dominant emotion in those faceted red eyes. Fear and certainty of death, and perhaps something else.

Obi-Wan released his grip and Jesson ran at the enemy, leaving his triple staff behind. At first Obi-Wan's heart sank; then, as the Jedi watched, the X'Ting warrior disarmed the first cannibal who struck at him, wrenching a spear from the creature's hands. Jesson whirled the javelin until it was nothing but a lethal blur, sending cannibals howling and scrambling into the shadows. He kicked and punched, feinted with his stinger, and then broke heads with his spear. Soon he had broken free and he and Obi-Wan were heading down a ladder, down a long narrow tube, into darkness.

Chapter 4

Hand over hand, Obi-Wan and Jesson climbed down a hollow stone tube barely as wide as their shoulders. As he gripped each rung of the ladder in turn, Obi-Wan wondered: what would they do if the bottom was sealed? Or blocked? In such a terribly constricted space, there was no room to maneuver. The cannibals could simply drop rocks down on them until—Then his foot touched the ground. Jesson reached the bottom a moment later, and they were out in a large rocky chamber.

Using his captured spear as a staff, Jesson led Obi-Wan away from the ladder, across a chamber as broad as a Chin-Bret playing field. Dim wreaths of mold illuminated some of the walls: immense statues lined the room, images of gigantic, regal X'Ting in various imperious poses, each of them at least thirty meters in height, some twice that size. He could just barely make out the insectoid features. Most were built into one of the walls in apparently endless array. A few were freestanding.

Despite the spear, Jesson was limping, the Jedi noticed, and seemed winded. "We can rest, if you need to, " Obi-Wan said.

"No, " Jesson gasped. "I want to get as far away from the entrance as possible. "

Obi-Wan looked back. "They don't seemed to be following us, " he said.

Jesson stopped, his brow furrowed. "You're right. I wonder why? "

Obi-Wan considered the possibilities, and didn't like what came to mind. Under what circumstances did predators fail to pursue fresh meat into the open? "Are these other statues hollow? "

"Perhaps. " Jesson paused. "I think I have heard of this, yes. "

"Perhaps they live there. They could be watching us now. "

"But why don't they pursue us? "

"Fear. Of us, or . . . " Suddenly, the cavern's open floor seemed far too exposed and vulnerable for Obi-Wan's taste. "Let's keep moving, shall we? "

Jesson nodded agreement and led the way across the wide-open space between the ladder and their destination, a cavern wall some hundreds of meters distant. The ground beneath their feet was spongy, more like farm loam than rocky cave soil.

"This way, " Jesson said, and when they had crossed the cavern, he leaned against the wall, gasping for air.

As they took a breather, Obi-Wan looked back the way they had come. The vast statues were so shrouded in darkness that he could barely make them out. What a sight this chamber must be with full illumination! The one statue that had led them down into the chamber was largest of all, its outline fading into shadow. Was this an image of some great leader or warrior, perhaps the last, great queen who had swallowed her pride to bring her people into the Republic's arms . . . ?

Jesson paused, taking a sip from a small flask of water. He shook his head, and drops of water flicked from the tuft of fur at his thorax.

"Are you all right? " Obi-Wan asked.

"No, " Jesson replied. He paused, then added, "Thank you for saving me. " He said it grudgingly, as if the words hurt his mouth.

"We are companions, " Obi-Wan replied simply. "Which way, now? "

"Well . . . the other entrance, the one that became sealed after a failed attempt, would be through these tunnels. " He pushed himself away from the wall, and they walked along the cavern's far edge. Obi-Wan's feet sank into the flaky soil with each step, a not entirely pleasant sensation. The soil grew harder, and suddenly they were on a meter-wide strip of rock climbing along the wall.

Obi-Wan was happy to be away from the soft cave floor. Something about it disturbed him. What exactly had happened here? His puzzle-solving mind worried at the problem from varied directions as the ground beneath them began to tilt up into a steeper incline.

They climbed along the ascending path for several minutes, finally reaching a tumble of rocks that buried the footpath. There was no way around it. Obi-Wan peered over the side: they were now so far above the ground that his glow rod's beam simply dissolved into darkness. Jesson poked and prodded at the rocks with the spear. "My brother must have tripped a deadfall here, " he said. A miniature avalanche, designed to protect the secret path. Jesson's brother had followed a faulty map, or perhaps just made a mistake. Obi-Wan and the X'Ting scrambled up over the rocks and gazed down the other side. Jesson pointed up along the path. "That's where the other door is. From here, everything looks all right. "

"I hope so, " Obi-Wan said soberly. "I don't relish the idea of going back up through the statue. "

"Nor do I. All right. Good. We have our path of retreat secure . .

. I think. Let's follow the map. "

They went back down over the rock tumble, and then farther down the ramp. Gleaming in the lamplight were more statues of various X'Ting in heroic poses. Jesson studied them carefully.

"This is what we need, " he said. Then he began muttering to himself in his people's clicking, popping speech.

Several of the engraved images depicted X'Ting with primary and secondary arms crossed, legs spread. Some were in male mode, and some in female. Around the heads of these full-size images were clusters of miniature engravings of similar design.

Suddenly Obi-Wan realized what he was looking at: hieroglyphs, images extracted from pictographs of X'Ting and Cestian environments. This was very old, the beginnings of written language. Jesson was reading the wall.

"Sounds and smells, " Jesson said. "Our culture is based on both. There is a code at work here, and if I can only remember my Old X'Tingian will we be able to find the next passage. "

He sniffed along the wall, studied, backed up almost to the edge of the ramp. Obi-Wan looked down into an inky void. They were fifty meters from the ground below. A bad fall.

"Shine the light higher, " Jesson whispered.

Obi-Wan did. There was another level of images up above the lower, and Jesson smiled. "Do you see these images? This says: We are not individuals, but of the hive . We are not to struggle alone, but shoulder to shoulder, and upon the shoulders of past hive heroes . "

Obi-Wan nodded. A fine sentiment.

"Please. Elevate me, " Jesson asked, setting his spear aside

For a moment Obi-Wan assumed that this was a request for enlightenment, but then realized Jesson was being quite literal. He cupped his hands, and the X'Ting climbed up, balancing himself with all four hands spread against the wall, feeling around. Then his fingers found their objectives, and Obi-Wan heard a sharp clicking sound.

The wall slid back, and an opening appeared. Jesson boosted himself up and disappeared into the hole. For a moment Obi-Wan was worried; then Jesson's head reappeared. "It's all clear. A passage between chambers. " He held an arm down, and Obi-Wan passed him the spear. Jesson gripped its shaft as Obi-Wan gathered the Force around him and leaped up to the opening. Then the X'Ting disappeared into the hole.

The hole was less than a meter wide, just large enough for crawling, but not much more. Darkness swallowed them completely, but Jesson shuffled ahead of him, and Obi-Wan had no option but to follow.

They were deep in the hive. The walls and ceiling were all of chewed stone. The roughly pentagonal tube branched off into numerous side tunnels. Again and again Jesson sniffed the path and found an old scent marker telling the way.

The roughness of the chewed surface threatened to abrade Obi-Wan's hands, and the strain of staying up on his toes as they crawled was slowly burning the muscles in his calves and shoulders. The rasp of his breathing echoed in the tube, making the close spaces seem closer still.

Then Jesson sighed, a long, low sound. The X'Ting warrior was outlined by a dim radiance coming from somewhere ahead of them. He made a contentedclick-pop mutter, and dropped from sight.

Chapter 5

Cautiously, Obi-Wan crawled forward until he reached the end of the tube, and looked out.

"Come down, " Jesson whispered.

There was no need to whisper. Nothing lived in this chamber. Its walls were crowded floor to ceiling with empty little pentagonal chambers, each just under a meter in diameter. An X'Ting larva hatchery? Obi-Wan crawled out and jumped down to another inclined ledge.

Jesson's faceted eyes shimmered with tears. "This is one of the old breeding chambers, " he said. "We changed in so many ways after the Republic came. The hive was never the same. But this is as it used to be. "

Here the luminescent fungus was bright enough to give a misty view of the floor twenty meters beneath them. It was covered with broken chrysalis shells, some of which might have lain there for a thousand standard years. Had this place ever known brightness or the shining of a star? As Obi-Wan's eyes adjusted to the light, he could see spires of rock that rose up irregularly through the soil beneath the cast-off X'Ting shells. Stalactites depended from the cavern's roof.

"Is this the chamber? " Obi-Wan asked.

"The other side, " Jesson said, pointing across the way. "Through the next wall. "

Astounding. Clearly, only an X'Ting could find his way through this labyrinth. The royal eggs had indeed found safe haven.

The chamber was similar to that of the Hall of Heroes: created by water erosion rather than by machines or the flow of lava. Despite its origin, the cubicles chewed in the rock walls implied that it had been modified by countless eons of hive activity, countless millions of willing workers. A thin, milky fog wreathed the floor, but through it he saw vast heaps and furrows of plowed dirt.

"How was the soil deposited here? " he asked. Usually soil was the result of plant and animal action degrading rock over time. Obi-Wan was surprised to find so much of it underground, away from a nurturing sun.

"Remember, " Jesson said, pointing at the walls with his spear, "thousands of generations of us lived down here. Just as we had builders, and warriors, and leaders, there were also those who chewed rock, their digestive systems

creating soil in which we could grow our crops. For eons we lived here, and the interior of Cestus was kinder to us than the surface. "

Thousands of generations. A planet whose surface was sand and chewed rock, its interior rich soil.

Truly, the galaxy was beyond imagination in its variety.

They descended along this second ramp, and Obi-Wan found himself lost in thoughts of what all of this might have been like, back before the time of the Republic. He imagined the hive swarming with life, the royal pair presiding over . . .

Then Obi-Wan's skin tingled, and he became instantly alert. A ripple in the Force, warning him. "On your guard, " he whispered.

Jesson's primary and secondary right hands gripped his spear fiercely. "What is it? "

Obi-Wan held up his right hand, demanding quiet. He felt something, a tremor in the soft soil beneath their feet.

Soft. As it had been in the previous chamber.

Soft. As if it were constantly plowed up.

"I've got a bad feeling about this, " Jesson said.

"Let's go on to the other side, " Obi-Wan said.

"I don't think we'll make it. "

The ground trembled. A quake? "What is it? " the Jedi asked.

"Worms, " Jesson said, his shoulders quivering, his four hands knotting into fists. "I should have known. They were thought to have retreated deep into the ground since the time of . . . " He seemed reluctant to speak. "Well, that supposed Jedi, at least. "

"Was that the service this Jedi Master performed for your royals? " Obi-Wan asked, drawing his lightsaber. The soil beneath them continued to heave.

"I don't know, " Jesson said, then added, "Perhaps. No offense, Master Jedi. You are indeed a mighty warrior, but if I know politicians, nothing much actually happened-he was just honored for being from Coruscant. "

Despite their danger, Obi-Wan had to chuckle. "My opinion of politicians is much like yours, " he confessed. "But I must say that G'Mai Duris seems better than most. "

An abrupt tingle in the Force-and Obi-Wan grabbed Jesson and jumped back just in time. The soil beneath them burst, and the mouth of the first worm appeared. It was dark brown, its skin covered with countless small spikes, every three or four meters marked off with a segmented ring. If the proportions were similar to other such beasts that Obi-Wan had seen, then it was thirty meters long at the least.

And the worm was not alone. Two more burst from the ground, their mouths gaping hungrily. It was too late for Obi-Wan and Jesson to run back to the ledge, and too far make it all the way to their destination. All they could do was find a place to make their stand.

Obi-Wan spotted the first of several limestone spurs poking up through the soil. "Get to the rocks! " he shouted, and they dashed for the only visible safety. One of the worms humped along right behind them, moving almost as fast as a human could run.

Obi-Wan took the rear guard, letting his companion reach safety. The Jedi scrambled up the rock with barely a moment to spare. One of the worms tried to crawl up after them, but now Obi-Wan turned and fought. His lightsaber flashed, and the worm screamed. He couldn't actuallyhear the sound, but he felt it clearly through the Force.

Jesson's grip slipped. The spear rattled to the dirt, and Jesson slid down the rock toward the worm's cilia-ringed mouth hole. Its razor teeth clamped down on the X'Ting's right leg, sawing. Obi-Wan was there in an instant, and sliced the creature's head off. Severed, the head flopped back to the sand . . . the remaining body still alive and writhing.

Jesson scrambled up, leg lacerated but still functional.

"Thank you, Master Jedi, " he said, shivering. Obi-Wan inspected the wound: the chitinous shell was splintered, exposing the tender pink muscle beneath. He bound it as best he could, and to his credit Jesson made not a single sound of pain, although it had to be brutal. When he was done, Obi-Wan looked down below them. Four worms crawled atop and beneath the soil now, and they showed no signs of abandoning pursuit.

So. This was what had happened to the "true" X'Ting, those who had remained behind. The soil they had built up over ages to grow their crops-burying their dead, fertilizing with their wastes-had finally become deep enough to conceal predators. The X'Ting in that first cavern had been caught unawares, driven into the hollow statues. And once there, they had been unable to open the sealed metal doors. There in the darkness, they had become desperate enough to resort to cannibalism. There they had been trapped.

As Obi-Wan and Jesson were trapped, here on one of the few rock spurs on the floor of this second cavern. Obi-Wan felt the first tiny whisper of despair and bared his teeth. He would not fail. Not die. Not here in the dark. He had a job to do; he would find a way to do it.

The worms hissed at them, their cilia wavering back and forth with a chilling, unnatural appetite.

Jesson grimaced and climbed a little higher as another worm tried to ascend the spur. Obi-Wan seared it with the lightsaber, and it retreated without a sound. Again Obi-Wan could sense its shriek through the Force.

The soil humped up in furrows. From both far ends of the cave additional worms appeared, plowing up the ground and gnashing at them. There had to be ten or fifteen in all by now. Some larger, some smaller, all deadly.

"Maybe they smell us. Or hear us. Or they're calling each other to dinner. " He shone his light up above them. "What's that? There's something up there. "

Favoring his injured foot, Jesson climbed higher on the spur, shining his light as he did.

There was indeed something clinging atop the spur. No, Obi-Wan realized as they climbed. Not something. Someone. And not clinging.

Strapped to the rock by a length of rope was the desiccated corpse of an X'Ting male. Little was left but carapace and dried flesh.

"What happened here? " Jesson whispered. "This was my broodmate Tesser. He made it this far, and no farther. " He climbed higher to touch his own forehead to his dead brother's withered brow. "He climbed up here to escape the worms. Strapped himself so that he wouldn't slide back down if he lost consciousness. If he became weak. And here he died. " So. Now they knew what had happened to two of those who had tried to reach the egg chamber.

"We will die, " Jesson said, his voice flat and drained of emotion.

"That's defeatist thinking, " Obi-Wan said. "After all, Tesser made it farther than the other. Perhaps we can make it farther still. "

Something like hope blossomed in Jesson's eyes. "You have a plan, Jedi? "

"Not yet, but I will. "

What distance to the far wall? Obi-Wan measured it with his eyes: sixty meters. Too far to run. The worms would overwhelm the wounded Jesson, and perhaps Obi-Wan, as well. And there was no point in reaching the egg chamber without his X'Ting companion. Without Jesson's specialized knowledge, he had no chance at all of accessing the vault.

"What equipment do you have? "

"My spear is gone. I have the glowlight, and a grapnel line. "

A grapnel line? That might come in useful. "Let me see it, " Obi-Wan said.

Jesson showed him the gun. It was about the size of a hand blaster, with a filament reel nestled beneath. Fairly standard GAR surplus.

"How much line? " Obi-Wan asked.

"Twenty meters? "

So. They had twenty meters of grapnel cable as standard equipment, but that wasn't enough to get them over . . .

To their left jutted another rock spur, this one about fifteen meters from their destination: the far wall. The spur was about thirty meters away. Could they make it that far? No, not with Jesson's wounded leg.

All right. What, then?

Obi-Wan looked up above their heads and noted a ten-meter stalactite above them, halfway between their current position and that rock spur. A plan began to evolve. It would depend on the strength of that stalactite, but it might just work.

"I'm going to try something, " Obi-Wan said. "If you trust me, we might make it through this. "

"All right, Jedi, " Jesson said. "I have no choice. Let's hear your idea. "

"You'll see, " Obi-Wan said, and climbed higher up the spur. The worms humped around the base. From time to time one or two tried to crawl up, but they couldn't get good purchase on the rock and slipped back down.

Obi-Wan took Jesson's grapnel and aimed carefully, firing it at the protruding stalactite. The line flew true, its claw-tip anchoring deeply into the rock. He yanked hard, and it seemed firm enough.

"All right, " he said. "Hold on to my waist. "

Jesson looked at him dubiously, then his strong, thin arms encircled Obi-Wan's waist.

Obi-Wan braced himself and swung off the rock spur. They flew in a long, shallow glide, the radius of their arc taking them so close to the soil that the worms hungrily snapped at them, cilia weaving as if in starvation or anger.

Jesson clung to him, faceted red eyes wide in wonder as they flew . . .

Then the X'Ting uttered a shrill series of terrified clicks as the stalactite above them broke. They were on the upswing of the arc when it happened. A huge chunk of rock snapped free and fell, sabotaging their arc. They flew up, then the rock smacked down into the soil, jerking them back down hard, so that they whuffed into the soil a moment later, the impact slamming the breath from Obi-Wan's lungs.

He scrambled up as fast as he could, winded but unwilling to die a meal for the worms.

"Run! " he screamed as the creatures streaked toward him. He had the presence of mind to trigger the grapnel's release mechanism and jerk the line free. The reel pulled in the filament as he sprinted toward the next rock, feet pounding puffs of dirt from the ground. Jesson was limping too slowly. Obi-Wan closed his mind to pain, grabbed with his right arm, and, ignoring the strain, forcing himself to greater effort, heaved the X'Ting soldier up on the rock then leapt up himself as one of the worms grabbed his left boot. He reached out, scrabbling for the rock and failing to find purchase as the worm struggled to drag him back down. But Jesson had regained his senses, and reached down for Obi-Wan's wrist with primary and secondary hands. He braced his spindly legs and pulled for dear life.

Obi-Wan managed to brace his knee against the rock and pushed, forcing himself up as the worm lost its grip. He scrabbled up a bit higher and then, bracing himself, turned with lightsaber in hand and cut his attacker in half. The severed portion dropped to the ground and writhed, ichors oozing from the end, then disappeared into the ground and was gone.

The Jedi gulped air and breathed a sigh of relief. He looked up at Jesson. "Thank you, " he said.

"We're even now, " Jesson said. He scanned the wall ahead. "Well, we're better than halfway there. "

"That might be enough, if we're clever, " Obi-Wan said. He climbed up the limestone spur, measuring the distance to the far wall, hoping that he had been correct. Otherwise, it was all too possible that their skeletons might, one distant day, be found here on the rock.

"Where is the far opening? " he asked, shading his eyes with his hands. "I can't see it. "

"There is a rock ledge, about five meters above the ground, " Jesson said, pointing.

Obi-Wan squinted until he could make it out. "Yes. "

"And beyond that is the entrance to the chamber. I can get us in. After that . . .
" The X'Ting shrugged. "I do not know. "

"All right. " Obi-Wan measured the distance between the far wall and the rock spur, and found a surface that looked suitable.

He fired the grapnel. Once again the line flew true, anchoring itself in the rock. He anchored the other end to their spur. He hated to leave the gun behind, but either there were additional resources available on the other side, or all attempts at survival might be futile.

"Give me the light, " Obi-Wan said. He turned Jesson's glowlight up to full radiance and shone it directly in the worms' eyes.

For many years the worms had been in the caves beneath ChikatLik. But it was possible they hadn't been down here long enough to grow blind-that, in fact, brilliant light might actually be painful and confusing to them.

And clearly it was. Already they were scurrying away, their pain echoing through Obi-Wan's Force-sense. "Let's go! " he yelled. And he began moving out over the soil, hand over hand along the line.

Twenty meters, give or take. The worms seemed to have recovered from the light: they were humping back in the direction of their quarry. Obi-Wan swung his feet up and crossed them over the line for support, then triggered the lamp again beneath them. The worms gave their soundless squeal and retreated-But not as far. Obi-Wan extended his senses through Force, sensing the hissing, coiling creatures as they crept back. He unhooked his feet from the line and moved hand over hand again, increasing his speed.

The line cut into his fingers. Pain like the slice of a frozen razor raced down his arm to his elbow. He bit back a scream, refusing to give up their position.

Could the worms see them? He wasn't certain, but Obi-Wan considered it unlikely the creatures had evolved to hunt prey dangling over their heads.

Still, the vibration of the falling rock, and perhaps the scream of the wounded worm, had summoned additional creatures from deeper in the caves. By the fungal glow along the walls, he could see that the soil beneath them teemed with worms, boiled with them, hundreds, thousands of them—finger-size to meters in length. They jostled and snapped at each other, reaching up for Obi-Wan and Jesson.

One of the severed segments actually managed to leap free of the soil, gnashing at Obi-Wan's pant leg, missing the calf muscle but enmeshing itself in the cloth. It whipped its tail this way and that, trying to find purchase.

Swaying, trying to shake the thing free, Obi-Wan lost hold with his right hand. Behind him, Jesson emitted a sour, frightened wisp of air.

Dangling by his left hand, Obi-Wan called his lightsaber to his right hand, triggered it, and cut at the thing hanging from his leg. Severed, the worm fell in halves to the ground below them.

Hand over hand. Hand over hand. The grapnel line sliced his palms, but he shut the pain away in a small dark room in his mind and concentrated on the task at hand.

When finally his feet were over the ledge, he dropped down and pivoted. Jesson was almost there, swinging back and forth like a pendulum. The X'Ting warrior jumped down and almost missed the ledge; he battled for balance, Obi-Wan snatching at his hand.

Then they were both safe on the ledge, far above the snapping mouths of the worms.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Obi-Wan turned toward the wall. Viewed from the far side, shadow had disguised a shallow tunnel, but the mouth was easy to see now. At the end of the tunnel was a sealed durasteel door inset with some manner of electronic reader device. "How do we open this? "

Jesson pressed his face up close to the door. "It is said that any X'Ting can open this door. It is what awaits within-"

As if it had been listening to his speech and timing its own response, the door sighed open. Obi-Wan and Jesson stepped inside.

Chapter 6

The chamber within was roughly egg-shaped, constructed of some kind of white, curved tile, probably something produced offworld. There were two other doors: one on the far side of the chamber, and the other directly to the right of them, with another sensor housed against it.

Obi-Wan walked to the door across the way. A monitor screen was set into the middle, and he manipulated its fingerpad until a sharp little holo appeared. It seemed to be an image taken right outside this very portal. When it focused, he turned away again: huddled on the far side of the door was a body. Another X'Ting brother who had tried and failed to reach the egg chamber. Obi-Wan could not see what had killed the warrior, but his body looked as if the exoskeleton had been partially . . . dissolved.

He shuddered. Without whatever specific instructions had been destroyed by plague or supernova, could anyone have been expected to survive such a gauntlet?

Jesson was at the silver door, touching sensors and manipulating the controls. Obi-Wan waited while he attempted several different patterns, but then the young X'Ting warrior hit the wall with a balled fist in frustration. "I can't open it! "

"How many times did you try? " Obi-Wan asked, alarmed. "Don't you only have three attempts? "

"Not here, " Jesson said. "Once we are inside, the challenge truly begins. "

"I can try my lightsaber if you wish. "

Jesson laughed. "I think not. This door was designed to resist any known torch. Just give me a bit of time, and-"

But Obi-Wan had already triggered his weapon and was forcing the glowing blade into the door. "Turn your head away, " he warned. Jesson complied.

Within a few moments, Obi-Wan knew Jesson was right: this door was certainly tougher than the previous one. Regardless, the Jedi weapon blistered the durasteel, sending sparks flying and globules of glowing metal dribbling down to the floor.

The door was sandwiched with energy-absorbing circuits that slowed, but never stopped him. Finally the door twisted free, metal droplets spraying as it clattered down. They stepped through the smoking entrance.

Within was another egg-shaped chamber with a three-meter pentagonal gold seal emblazoned on the floor. On the far side, a single molded chair sat before an array of . . . what? Nozzles and beam projectors pointed menacingly at the chair, clear warning for anyone who would brave the challenge.

Rows of readouts and meters blinked to life as they entered, and Obi-Wan inspected them swiftly. Most of the controls were labeled in both Basic and X'Tingian. One of the most provocative labels read: WORM CALL/WORM SENSOR.

Worm call? Then one of his questions was more or less answered. The worms had not been natural to the cave. The security company had brought them here as a passive guarding device. But had something gone horribly wrong? Had the worms found a way into the Hall of Heroes, where so many X'Ting still lived?

That would explain much. What a moment of horror that must have been, when the mindless creatures appointed to guard their most precious treasure burrowed or found a way through the rock wall separating the egg chamber from the living settlement, and chaos reigned.

A hologrammic display caught his eye. A sonic gauge of some kind, labeled HYPERSONIC REPEL. So . . . the worms were called by sound, and could be repelled the same way. A simple answer, but one unknown to the X'Ting.

Jesson had already eased his way into the command seat. Obi-Wan smelled the change in the room and guessed that the X'Ting was calming down, preparing to perform a task for which he had long prepared.

Jesson's four sets of fingers interlaced, and there was aBRRRRAKK! sound as sixteen knuckles cracked in a whiplash.

The X'Ting began his sequence, first speaking in X'Tingian, then switching to Basic, perhaps in respect for Obi-Wan. "The start-up sequence is on record, " he said, his six limbs moving with insectlike precision as he manipulated the controls.

"What is all of this? " Obi-Wan asked, indicating the nozzles and ray projectors surrounding the seat in a halo. Was it possible that the legend, the fragmentary information available to Jesson, was incorrect, and it wasn't the eggs that would be destroyed if three wrong answers were given-but the questioner himself?

For the first few minutes Jesson's efforts were unrewarded; then a hologram blossomed before them. The glowing image was a schematic of the entire room, the chamber itself. They could see a narrow shaft beneath the gold seal, and at the bottom of that shaft, behind a thick shield, lay two precious eggs surrounded by a laser array. Tentatively, he reached out through the Force . . . but the mechanism controlling the array was too complex for his understanding. His heart sank. There was little question that the array would defeat any efforts he might make to circumvent it. How he wished that Anakin were here! His Padawan learner was an intuitive genius with all things mechanical, and might well have devised a means of defeating this apparatus. Obi-Wan felt helpless.

Thankfully, his X'Ting companion had survived to enter the capsule. Their only hope of success lay in Jesson's four capable hands.

Jesson took the controls as if he were playing some kind of complex musical instrument. Obi-Wan could hear varying sighs and squeaks, and the X'Ting warrior answered the calls in a blur of finger-play across the control board.

Finally the schematic floated to the left. A spherical target shape appeared, its three layers rotating above a core resembling the egg chamber.

Three concentric layers. Obi-Wan's mouth felt dry.

He glanced at his wrist chrono and was astounded. Had only an hour elapsed since they had first entered the catacombs? Since they had left the X'Ting council chamber? It felt like days!

An X'Ting voice with an interrogative intonation sounded, followed by a voice speaking in Basic. "Answer the following question: What is in the hive but not of the hive? What nurtures but is nurtured, what dreams but never sleeps? "

Jesson took a deep breath. From a belt pod he extracted a flat rectangle. "This is the last remaining key chip, " he said. "I have only three chances, but I think that we will succeed. "

"Do you know the answer to the riddle? " Obi-Wan asked.

"Yes, " Jesson said confidently. "It is the Zeetsa. They live in the hive but are not X'Ting. They give to us, but in turn receive nourishment and care. They dream but are aware. " His certainty increasing with every motion, Jesson placed the card in its slot.

There was a soft blur, and the voiced of the scanner said: "Your answer? "

"The Zeetsa, " Jesson said.

There was a pause. The sphere began to rotate more swiftly and the outer third began to peel away, the pieces dissolving as they did. Jesson sat, astounded, as the voice said, first in X'Tingian and then in Basic:

"Incorrect. "

Jesson stood from the chair, eyes wide and disbelieving. The voice said: "Sit down, or the session is terminated. "

Jesson looked back at Obi-Wan. The nozzles at the edges of the room opened like sunblossoms welcoming the dawn. Obi-Wan suspected-no, heknew that if the session was terminated, so were they. And so were the eggs.

"Sit down, " he said quietly. And Jesson did. The nozzles seemed to track their motion. Obi-Wan had no interest in discovering what might flow through them at a moment's notice.

"Do you wish to continue the sequence? "the machine asked.

"Do I have a choice? " Jesson said miserably.

"Yes. You may choose personal termination. If you choose this option, the eggs will not be damaged. "

"I'll try again, " he said, and swallowed hard.

"Very well. "A pause. The pause lasted for so long that Obi-Wan wondered if it was going to speak again, but then it did.

"Who lived and now stand still? Who cared not for acclaim, but are idolized by all? Who carried weight and now ring hollow? "

"You speak Basic and X'Tingian, " Obi-Wan said to Jesson. "Are the words accurately translated? "

The warrior's serrated teeth clattered. "I think so. There is a certain poetry missing from the Basic translation. "

" 'Who lived and stand still, ' " Obi-Wan went on. "That could have two meanings: to be motionless, or to persist, to 'still stand, ' if you get my meaning. Do you understand this one? "

"I believe so, " Jesson said, but he no longer seemed so confident.

"Then do you think you know the answer? "

Jesson stared at the spilling sphere. Just two layers left. "I think so. "

"Then answer, " Obi-Wan said, trying to give the X'Ting confidence that he himself did not entirely feel.

Jesson took a deep breath. "I am ready to proceed, " he said.

"Answer, "the machine said.

"The heroes of the hive. The Hall of Heroes. "

The seconds ticked past, and nothing happened. Then the sphere began to rotate more swiftly, and the second, orange layer peeled away and vanished.

"Incorrect, "the voice said.

Jesson shivered in the seat, and Obi-Wan detected a sharp, sour odor in the air. Fear? "They should not have sent me, " the X'Ting said.

Self-pity? Jesson did not seem the type, but . . . Then the warrior went on, haltingly, "I can't do this. Because of me, the eggs will be destroyed. "

There it was. The reaction hadn't been self-pity at all. It was concern for the eggs Obi-Wan had heard in Jesson's voice, seen in his body, smelled in the air.

The warrior was on the edge, about to give up. Obi-Wan had seen this before. It was not fear, as most beings knew it, because for most, fear was a matter of personal loss: loss of self-image, loss of health, loss of life. But even without being able to directly interpret the pheromones now flooding the air, he knew that these were not the source of Jesson's anguish. The X'Ting warrior loved the hive, and was now terribly afraid of letting it down. He had been well chosen. He would be more than happy to die in the accomplishment of this task, die anonymously and in great pain if need be, if the hive could only survive and thrive, and be raised up to its rightful glory.

Jesson was locked almost in paralysis, his hands hovering over the controls. Every muscle in his body seemed to be stiffened in unyielding contraction, all of the cockiness drained from him by the reality of the tests he had already failed. "How? " he said. "How could it be? What answers were they looking for? "

"We can't know, " Obi-Wan said, and laid a hand on the X'Ting's shoulder. "All we can do, all we can ever do, is the best we can. The rest is controlled by the Force. "

"The Force! " Jesson spat. "I've heard so much about you precious Jedi and your Force. "

"It is not our Force, " Obi-Wan said, trying to comfort him. "It owns us. And you. It creates all of us, but is also created by us. "

"Riddles! " Jesson screamed. "Nothing but riddles. I've had enough! "

He leapt up from the seat and ran across the room, hammering at the door, screaming, "Let me out! Let me out ! "

"Return to the seat, or the session will be terminated, "the machine said calmly.

Obi-Wan gazed at Jesson and then made a snap decision. He went to sit in the chair.

"You are not the original participant, "the machine said in its androgynous, synthesized voice. "It is necessary that the original participant finish the process. "

Obi-Wan looked back over his shoulder at the wounded, broken X'Ting warrior. How proud and confident he had seemed only an hour before! How obvious now that all of that pride had been a thin shield against the fear of failing his people, a support against the terrible weight of that responsibility.

"He is unable to continue, " Obi-Wan said.

"In one hundred seconds this test is terminated, "the voice said. "Ninety-nine, ninety-eight . . . "

"Ask me the questions! " Desperation crept into Obi-Wan's voice. "Please. Ask me the-

"Ninety-three, ninety-two . . . "

Obi-Wan jumped out of the chair and went to Jesson, still huddled on the floor, primary and secondary arms wrapped around his knees.

"Jesson, " he said in his calmest voice. "You must try again. "

"I can't. "

"You must. There is no one else. "

The X'Ting sank his head against his knees and shivered.

"All your life, " Obi-Wan said, "you have prepared yourself for a great challenge. As all warriors do. "

No response.

"Do not think I don't know how you feel. Your warrior clan could not protect the hive from Cestus Cybernetics. They have power beyond anything your people can match. And so you feel that even your death cannot free your people. Even the best effort you can manage is not enough to fill the need. So deep in your heart you feel that there is nothing. "

Jesson finally looked up. "You understand this? "

"It is the same on planets all over the galaxy, " the Jedi said. "Whenever there are conquered species, the warriors are the first to be oppressed. Because they are the most dangerous. "

"Seventy . . . sixty-nine . . . sixty-eight . . . "

"All my life, " Jesson said, "all I've wanted is to fulfill the function I was appointed at birth. As my ancestors did. When female, to bear healthy eggs, to learn and heal and teach. When male, to fight for my hive, to keep it safe. Perhaps to die. "

Jesson looked up at Obi-Wan, faceted eyes glimmering with hope. If the offworlder could understand his misery, then perhaps, just perhaps there was a way out. There was an answer.

"And then when G'Mai Duris regained leadership of the hive council, you had hope. "

"Yes! "

"Fifty-four, fifty-three . . . "

Obi-Wan fought to keep his voice calm, although he felt the urgency boiling within him. "And when you were chosen to be the one to find and bring back the royals, you thought that this was your chance. This was your opportunity to serve the hive. This was the moment of glory! "

"Yes! "

"It still is, " Obi-Wan said. "All warriors dream of conquest, of glorious victory or glorious death. But none of us knows the price of our lives. None of us knows the worth of our deaths. That is for others to decide, after we are gone. All we can do is struggle, to fight with both courage and compassion, to sell our lives dearly. And later, after the battle is over, others will be able to decide if that sacrifice was in vain, or whether it was the deciding factor. Some of us must place our lives on the altar of sacrifice. Others on our dreams of victory. "

Jesson gazed up at him, some small measure of hope and understanding creeping in. "And if I fail, and the royal eggs die? "

"Then you will have done all that you could, serving the hive with all your strength. "

"And if my failure costs your life as well as my own, Jedi? "

Obi-Wan spoke as kindly as he could. "My life was forfeit the moment I set myself on this path. Tread not the path to war seeking to preserve life. That is a fool's dream. Seek to live your days honoring whatever principles you hold dear. Work to gain the highest skills of which you are capable. Sell your life dearly. "

"Be true to the hive, " Jesson said.

"Yes. "

"How can a human understand so well? "

Obi-Wan smiled. "We all have a hive, " he said.

"Twenty-seven, twenty-six . . . "

"Stand, X'Ting warrior, " Obi-Wan said, putting durasteel into his voice.

Jesson stood.

"Fifteen, fourteen . . . "

He made his way back to the chair and sat down. The countdown ceased.

"Are you prepared to continue?" the voice asked in Basic, after a series of X'Tingian pops.

Jesson answered in affirmative clicks.

There was a pause. The rotating hologrammic sphere was moving more swiftly now. But a single layer remained over the egg chamber.

"Answer," the machine said. "Who ate our eggs and now hide their young? Whose web of fear ensnares them? Who stole the sun but now live in shadow?"

"It's too simple," Jesson whispered.

"Sometimes simplicity is the best disguise," Obi-Wan said. "Don't try to be tricky. Answer with truth."

"But that is what I did before," Jesson said. "And both times I was wrong."

"This was created by your own people," Obi-Wan said. "They would not make it impossible for you to succeed. Trust your forebears."

But Obi-Wan felt a slight prickle at the back of his neck. Something. A warning? A clue? Something. What was it? Something about the array of weapons around the chair? The nozzles. The questions. Apparently simple for an X'Ting . . .

But the answers were wrong.

Obi-Wan's instinct was screaming at him, but he couldn't put his finger on what, exactly, it was trying to say. Couldn't, but had to. This was the last chance, and if he couldn't help his X'Ting companion, all was lost, and his cause was set back irreparably.

Still, in the depths of his heart, he felt a simple answer, heard it echoing with the truth of the Force.

"Answer truthfully, " he said again. "Don't try to be clever. Don't try to second-guess. Give it the answer that you know to be true. "

Jesson nodded. "The spider people, " he said. "Once, they were the lords of this planet. Once, they drove us from the surface. We sent them to the shadows. "

His hands splayed out on the control panel, and his eyes were locked on the rotating sphere. What? What . . . ?

It rotated more rapidly, and a thin whining sound arose in the room, seemed to envelop them. Then the sphere accelerated faster still, and the segments fragmented and flew away.

"Answer incorrect, "the voice said. "Egg termination has begun. "

Obi-Wan stared, shocked. How wrong could he have been? Rarely had his insights been proven so horribly wrong. Perhaps he could burn through the floor with his lightsaber and save the royal pair . . .

He triggered his weapon and blazed it into the floor's pentagonal gold seal. Beneath it, he imagined, was a case-hardened durasteel vault door. The hologrammic image was melting, blazing, even as the first sparks leapt from the floor and the room filled with smoke. Jesson sat stunned in the chair, unable to move. "No, " he said. "I did everything right. I did everything. No, please. "

"Vaporization fifty percent complete-"

The chamber lights flashed on and off in dizzying bursts, and nozzles at the corners of the rooms began to hiss, expelling a thin greenish gas. Obi-Wan snapped his rebreather into his mouth, sorry that he didn't have one for Jesson, as well. But if he could just get through this lock, if he could just get to the egg vault, even if his companion perished, the mission would still . . .

"Vaporization complete. "

He felt numb.

Jesson leaned over the controls, sobbing. "Kill me, kill me, " he said, speaking to no one in particular, and the universe in general.

The weapons array around Jesson began to glow, and the mist filling the air was sucked toward it. In a few minutes the room was cleared of mist, and Jesson lay still. Obi-Wan looked at his companion's limp body, feeling a sense of despair and failure that he had rarely known.

Then . . . Jesson moved .

He sat up and looked around, as torpidly as if he had been drugged. "Why am I still alive? " he asked.

"Look at the holo, " Obi-Wan said quietly.

Without any fuss, the schematic had reappeared on the display. In miniature form, the egg chamber was rising up through the shaft.

"What . . . what is this? " Jesson said.

The computer began a series of clicks and pops.

"What does it say? " Obi-Wan asked.

Jesson listened carefully. "It says . . . 'Congratulations, X'Ting warrior. You have succeeded. ' "

Obi-Wan was staggered. What was this?

He looked more carefully at the weapons array around the chair and realized that he had been wrong. It wasn't a weapons array at all. They weresensors. And the gas? It had been some kind of analytic compound that combined with Jesson's pheromones, the smells that X'Ting emitted under stress. The resultant cocktail had been reabsorbed and analyzed by the sensor array . . .

Clarity struck like lightning. "You were never intended to answer the questions successfully, " Obi-Wan exclaimed. "Your answers were probably correct. Answering them proved that you knew X'Ting history. The sensors proved you were X'Ting. But it needed to know how you would react to failure. "

"To . . . failure? But I don't understand. "

"You might have sought the egg from a wish to destroy it. Or to control all the X'Ting. It might have been for lust of power, or from greed. But when you came from love of hive, and failed, and saw your failure as killing the last king and queen, you felt not anger, but anguish. The test was not for your mind. It was for your heart. "

"It smelled my grief, " Jesson said, comprehending.

The burned gold seal rose up, exposing a durasteel column of the same shape. The column rose until it was Jesson's height, revealing a chamber. Thick transparent crystal windows slid open, showing a disk half a meter high. Around the edge of the disk blinked the red-white lights of an activated antigrav ring. With the greatest delicacy, Jesson pulled the disk out. The antigrav ring reduced its effective weight to no more than a few grams. Holding it in hovering position with the touch of their fingers, X'Ting and Jedi checked the little readout meter blinking at the top.

"They are alive, " he whispered. "I will take them to the council. Our medical clan will know what to do. "

"Yes, " Obi-Wan said.

The walls were blinking more rapidly. A speaker squealed a deep, booming vibration that rattled Obi-Wan's spine.

"What's that? " Jesson asked.

Obi-Wan inspected the controls. "I think it's a worm repellent, " he said. "The room is letting us leave. "

The doors unsealed. They examined the far door. The dead X'Ting lay limp and half melted. "What killed him? " Jesson asked.

"I don't know. And I don't want to take the risk. We know the hazards behind us. We'll go back the way we came. "

Chapter 7

The egg cask was relatively easy to take through the door leading to the worm chamber. They stood on the ledge and gazed down on the floor beneath them. Artificial lights had triggered along the ceiling and, in combination with the fungus, illuminated the plowed soil where the worms had fled the shrill, painful sounds. Obi-Wan extended his senses into Force: nothing. The cave was deserted.

They moved the disk down to the dirt floor. With the help of the antigrav unit, the carbonite disk virtually floated across the cavern. The rock walls seemed so huge and majestic now. Obi-Wan hadn't been able to appreciate it, but as artificial lights switched on in the ceiling, the sight of cascading stalactites and vast arched walls took his breath away.

What sort of celebratory scene had the builders pictured for this moment? Were thousands of X'Ting expected to be gathered now, cheering this ceremony as a new queen and king entered the world?

How strangely and sorrowfully it had all worked out.

There would be such celebration eventually, of course, but not now. Now there was silence and shadows.

The egg cask slid easily through the pentagonal openings on the far side of the cavern. Jesson seemed drained but exultant, a different being from the cocky young warrior who had accompanied Obi-Wan from the council chamber less than two hours before.

Truly, Obi-Wan thought, transformation was not a matter of time. It happened in a blink, or not at all.

They crawled through the darkness, pulling the precious cargo between them. Jesson found his way through the labyrinth more easily this time, and their steady shuffling was not really laborious-it was filled with a sense of purpose.

"You know, Jedi, " Jesson said back over his shoulder, "I may have been wrong about you. "

"It's possible, " Obi-Wan said, smiling.

A few moments passed, during which they proceeded in darkness, Jesson scenting his way and perhaps organizing his thoughts.

"I've seen what you can do, and who and what you are. " He paused. "It is even possible that Duris wasn't lying about that Jedi Master. Maybe he really did visit, and maybe he really did do something worth remembering. "

Obi-Wan chuckled. He himself might never know. At least, not until he returned to Coruscant. Then he might make polite inquiries, just to satisfy his curiosity.

On the other hand, some of the greatest Jedi were notoriously reticent to speak of their deeds. His questions might well be carefully deflected, his curiosity never satisfied.

They reached the next chamber, the hall of statues where they had first entered. Jesson climbed out and down onto the ledge. Obi-Wan gently pushed the egg cask out. Suspended by its antigrav unit, it floated down to Jesson as gently as a chunk of tilewood settling through water.

Obi-Wan jumped down lightly. There was a choice to make: to go back the way they had come, to reenter that first hollow statue and brave the cannibals again, or . . .

"I'm in no mood for an unnecessary battle, " the Jedi said. "Let's climb the rocks and see if the door up on the far side will open. "

"Agreed, " Jesson said. Fatigue blurred his voice. The last hours had to have been the most taxing of the X'Ting warrior's life. A frantic battle, a climb through darkness, pursuit by carnivorous cave worms, dooming and then saving his species' royal heirs . . .

Obi-Wan wondered: would an X'Ting deal with this stress by celebrating, or by hibernating?

When they were both safely on the stone ledge, they guided the egg cask up the incline toward what Jesson said was a door.

It took several nerve-racking minutes to get the egg cask over the rockfall. On the far side they found something ghastly: the corpse of another of Jesson's

broodmates, his lower body jutting from beneath a boulder. His withered secondary arm still clutched a lamp.

So much death, in service to their hive. Any species that produced both a G'Mai Duris and a Jesson Di Blinth was formidable indeed.

Obi-Wan picked up the lamp. It was of industrial design, heavier and more powerful than the GAR-surplus model Jesson had brought down into the labyrinth. When he triggered it, an eye-searing beam splayed out against the wall.

Pity it hadn't helped Jesson's brother.

Just a few meters up the ramp was the door that would take them back to the main hive. A droid mechanism had barred the door. In all probability, the same booby trap had triggered the deadfall.

"I think my question is answered, " Jesson said behind Obi-Wan, voice deep and respectful.

"What question is that? " Obi-Wan asked, triggering his lightsaber's energy beam. He examined the door more closely, judging the best angle for the initial cut.

"Look. Please, " Jesson said.

Obi-Wan turned around, allowing his eyes to follow Jesson's beam of light. It played out along the cavern, illuminating in turn image after gigantic image of the kings and queens of the X'Ting, their greatest leaders in colossal array. Rendered in chewed stone was a veritable forest of noble, insectoid titans. Some male, some female, some tall and young, some stooped and old, their four hands variously held in postures of beseeching, imploring, protecting, comforting, teaching, healing.

A hall of heroes, indeed, Obi-Wan thought. "What is it? "

"There, " Jesson replied. "Where we first came in. " And he focused the beam on the largest statue.

Now Obi-Wan could see the stooped, aged figure far more clearly. The narrow ladder tube they had descended had been a cane. The chamber in which they had fought so desperately against the cannibal X'Ting was, from without, seen to be a muscularly rounded torso. Their point of initial entry, the very first chamber, was a head with flared, triangular ears. The statue stood at least seventy meters high, taller than any other in the X'Ting Hall of Heroes.

Indeed, many questions were answered, but more remained, questions that Obi-Wan might never satisfy. For there, robed arm outstretched in greeting, gigantic and benevolent in the lamplight of a valiant, long-dead X'Ting soldier, loomed the hollow, chewed-stone statue of a smiling Master Yoda.

Hero of Cartao

ONE YEAR AFTER THE BATTLE OF GEONOSIS

"Master Doriana?" Emil Kerseage's deep voice called. "We're here."

Kinman Doriana awoke with a start, blinking his eyes against the sunlight streaming in through the shuttle's viewports. For a moment he gazed at the landscape rolling beneath him, trying to remember where exactly he was. There had been so many systems...

The disorientation cleared. He was on Cartao, major trading center for Prackla Sector, carefully nonaligned in the war between the Republic and the Separatists. And home to...

"There it is," Kerseage said. He turned the control stick delicately, rolling the shuttle slightly to the left to give Doriana a better look. "Spaarti Creations."

Doriana gazed out the side viewport, impressed in spite of himself. Situated among a group of forested hills just north of the compact town of Foulahn City, perhaps three kilometers northwest of the equally compact Triv Spaceport, was the unique manufacturing plant known as Spaarti Creations. Over a kilometer across at its widest, it had the patchwork look of something that had repeatedly been added onto over the decades. The roofline echoed the frozen chaos, with towers, heat exchangers, antennas, and skylights poking out at apparently random spots along the building's overall three-story height. There

were no windows he could see, ventilation apparently being handled by a line of small, louvered air vents dotting the outer walls about midway up the sides. "Impressive," he commented.

"You think so?" Kerseage shrugged. "Personally, I've always considered it an architectural version of a weed patch. No order or organization anywhere."

"Ever been inside?"

"No one but employees get to go in," the other said, his lip twisting with disgust and resentment. "Them, and the high and mighty."

"Like me?" Doriana asked.

Kerseage glanced at him, as if suddenly remembering just who his passenger was. "No, no, I was thinking about Lord Binalie's chums," he backtracked hastily. "The Prackla Trade Council-that sort of crowd."

"You don't think much of them?"

Kerseage shrugged again, uncomfortably this time. "It's nothing to do with me," he muttered. "I got a shuttle; I fly people places. That's all."

"I see," Doriana said, returning his attention to the manufacturing plant now passing directly beneath them. Clearly, Kerseage didn't want to say any more.

But then, he didn't have to. Like everything else he ever did, Doriana had made sure to research Cartao before coming here and hiring this particular man to bring him across the sparsely settled planet to Spaarti Creations. The cargo transport company Kerseage had once owned had been inadvertently run out of business two years earlier by a poorly worded regulation the Prackla Trade Council had issued after the Battle of Geonosis.

Kerseage's appeal was still crawling its way through the system, but by now the issue was essentially moot. His company was gone, and he clearly blamed Lord Binalie for it.

"What about the plant's satellite facilities?" he asked, his eyes flicking around the forested areas north and west of the main facility. "The buildings where they store raw materials and finished product."

"You mean the three Outlinks?"

"Right," Doriana said. "Where are they?"

"I don't know, exactly," Kerseage said. "The closest one's supposed to be about three kilometers northeast, just past that big gray-topped worker barracks thing." He pointed.

"Mm," Doriana said, peering into the distance. There was nothing showing in that direction that he could see. Well camouflaged, either by accident or by design. That could be useful. "Where does Lord Binalie live?"

"There." Kerseage pointed to the left as he brought the shuttle around in a wide semicircle. "You see Foulahn City, just south of that kilometer-wide stretch of grassland?"

"I see it," Doriana said. "I don't think I've ever seen a city come to a stop that abruptly before. Except where there's a lake or cliff to limit it, of course."

"It might as well be a cliff," Kerseage grunted. "That particular line of grassland marks the southern edge of Spaarti land, and no one travels or builds there. The Cranscoc insist on it. Anyway, you see that big open area on the northern edge of the city, butting up against the grass strip?"

"Yes," Doriana said. It looked like a park-grassland, quite a few clumps of trees, large sections of sculpted bushes-with a few small buildings and one very large one. Even from this distance, the place reeked of wealth and power. On one of the low hills facing the plant, he could see a pair of figures standing together. "The Binalie estate?"

"You got it," Kerseage said. "You seen enough?"

Doriana took a last look around, fixing the geography in his mind. Foulahn and Navroc Cities lay to the south and southeast of the plant, with the craggy Red Hills pushing up against the southern ends of both cities. Triv Spaceport was to the east, with low, increasingly forested rolling hills to the north, and a small river winding its way between the two cities and then between Foulahn and the spaceport.

"Yes," he told the pilot, resettling himself in his seat. "Let's go see Lord Binalie."

They're turning around some more," Corf Binalie announced, shading his eyes with his hand as he peered upward into the sky.

"I think they might be coming here."

"Who, the people in the shuttle?" Jafer Tories asked, his white hair blowing past his cheek as he gazed downward at the ground, trying to pick out the particular siviliv vine he and the boy had been following for the past half hour. "Yes, I know."

"You know who they are?" Corf asked, frowning up at him. "Did Dad say something to you about visitors?"

"No, but he didn't need to," Tories assured the boy. "It's been obvious for nearly a minute now."

"Oh, come on," Corf objected in that tone of strained patience twelve-year-olds did so well. "How could you?"

"Simple logical deduction," Tories told him in that pedantic instructor's tone seventy-three-year-olds did equally well.

"There was no reason for them to pass directly over the plant unless that was what they were specifically looking at. After realizing how little that gained them, their natural next step is to want to take a look from the inside. For that, they need to come see your father."

Corf shook his head in amazement. "Boy," he said. "I wish I were a Jedi."

"If you were, you'd probably have to goto war someday," Tories warned.

"You didn't have to," Corf pointed out.

"Not yet," Tories said with a grimace. "But I could be called up at any moment. The Council merely decided to leave a few Jedi where we are for the moment in case of unexpected Separatist moves in our areas. I could get to the scene of trouble anywhere in Prackla or Locris Sectors long before they could send

someone from Coruscant or one of the major battle areas. Being a Jedi is never easy, and can be downright dangerous."

"Yeah, but you're real smart," Corf said. Clearly, distant rumblings of war didn't faze him in the slightest. "You're good at figuring out stuff."

"Logical thinking is hardly the exclusive preserve of Jedi," Tories admonished him. "Anyone can learn to put facts together in their proper order. "

"Maybe," Corf said. "I still think it's a Jedi thing." Tories smiled, shading his eyes with his hand as he watched the shuttle approach. In point of fact, of course, he hadn't really known the shuttle was coming to the Binalie Estate, but had merely concluded there was a high probability of it. If it turned out the pilot was merely showing off Spaarti Creations to some visiting friend, he was going to look pretty foolish.

This might not be a bad thing. Tories had spent the past thirty years on Cartao, dispensing wisdom, mediating disputes, and handling the occasional pirate or overeager crime lord. Some of the locals had come to respect him, others had chosen to hate him, while most had never been more than vaguely aware that Prackla Sector even had a resident Jedi guardian.

But never in those thirty years had he run into a case of hero-worship like Corf Binalie's.

In his earlier days, it would have been highly gratifying, not to mention flattering, to be held in such high esteem. From the perspective of his years, though, he could see the danger lurking beneath that kind of unthinking adulation. Even at twelve Corf should be able to recognize a person's weaknesses as well as his strengths; should be learning how to accept people as they were, not creating a lens of perfection through which to gaze at them. Instead, the boy insisted on regarding him as the Ultimate Jedi: tall and strong, wise and kind, and never, ever wrong.

This particular incident wasn't going to do much to change that perception, either. The shuttle passed low over their heads, leaving no doubt that it was indeed making for the private landing pad beside the Binalie mansion.

And as it did so, Tories got a clear look at the company name on the shuttle's side.

"Come on," he said, taking Corf's arm and turning him toward the house.

"We're going back?" Corf asked, frowning. "I thought you were going to help me track this siviliv vine back to its root."

"We can do that later," Tories told him. "Right now, I think we ought to go see what these people want with your father."

"Okay," Corf said, clearly not understanding but willing to accept Tories' word for it. "You're the boss."

"I'm not the boss," Tories reminded him as they headed down the hill toward the distant house and the shuttle settling onto the pad. "I'm just the Jedi."

"Yeah," Corf said off-handedly. "Same thing."

Tories sighed to himself. Hopefully, the boy would grow out of it on his own.

One of Doriana's more simple amusements these days was to count off the minutes between the time a droid or servant disappeared into his master's inner sanctum with Doriana's credentials and the time Doriana himself was ushered in. In the case of Lord Pilester Binalie, that interval was less than a minute. Either Binalie was unusually respectful of Coruscant authority, or else he was too worried about this unexpected visitor to play power games.

"Master Doriana," Binalie said, rising from the massive chair behind the even more massive desk as the protocol droid escorted Doriana into the office. "It's a great honor to receive a representative from Supreme Chancellor Palpatine himself."

"A pleasure to meet you, as well, Lord Binalie," Doriana said in turn as he walked across the room. "I appreciate you giving me some of your time."

"My pleasure," Binalie said, waving Doriana to a chair facing the desk and sitting back down himself. "I wish you'd given me notice of your visit. I could have sent a shuttle to meet you, or else directed you to Triv Spaceport where you could have come over by landspeeder."

"There were reasons for coming into Cartao where I did," Doriana told him, watching the other's face closely. "As there were for choosing the particular transport I did."

A muscle in Binalie's cheek twitched. So he'd spotted the name on Kerseage's shuttle, too. "Yes; Emil Kerseage," he said. "I'm familiar with his case, Master Doriana, and I assure you the Trade Council is working to rectify it."

He waved a hand self-consciously. "It's certainly nothing Palpatine needs to involve himself with."

"Supreme Chancellor Palpatine is the champion of the common citizen," Doriana reminded him.

"Of course," Binalie said hastily, the first hints of perspiration beginning to sheen his face. "It's just that-" He broke off.

"Yes?" Doriana prompted.

The cheek muscle twitched again. "Let me be honest with you," Binalie said. "Cartao is trying to keep a low profile in this war against the Separatists. We don't have nearly enough military power to send troops or ships halfway across the galaxy on expeditionary missions. So far we've mostly escaped official notice; but if Chancellor Palpatine begins taking an interest in some minor bureaucratic dispute, that official notice is likely to be drawn our direction."

He tapped the desk in front of him with his forefinger. "And not just from the officials on Coruscant," he added pointedly. "The Separatists have so far ignored us, too."

"I understand your concerns," Doriana said. "But you have to understand in turn that no one has the luxury of deciding how a war is going to affect them. Nor is anyone permitted to choose how he can best serve in that conflict."

Binalie's eyes were very steady on Doriana's. "You're not here about Kerseage at all, are you?" he said quietly.

Doriana shook his head. "It was, and is, a useful cover story."

But no, Supreme Chancellor Palpatine sent me on far more important business."

Binalie's stony face went even stonier. "Spaarti Creations."

"Exactly," Doriana said. 'The Supreme Chancellor is intrigued by the reports he's heard about this factory whose production lines can be changed practically overnight. If the technique can be duplicated, it would mean a great deal for the Republic's war effort."

"It can't be," Binalie said flatly. "It's the Cranscoc and their fluid-tooling system that make it possible, and as far as we know the Cartao colony is the only place Cranscoc live."

"Thousands of them, I presume?"

Binalie hesitated the barest fraction of a second, as if wondering whether he could get away with a lie. "About fifty thousand, yes," he conceded, apparently deciding not to risk it.

"But they breed very slowly, and only a small fraction of each generation has the talent that allows them to serve as twillers.

Those are the ones who actually manipulate the fluid retooling that make Spaarti possible."

"I see," Doriana said, as if he hadn't already thoroughly researched the whole operation. "Still, the Supreme Chancellor will want me to be absolutely certain. Would it be possible for me to inspect the facilities themselves? Quietly and privately, of course."

Binalie knew a politely phrased order when he heard it. "Of course," he said, getting to his feet. "I have a private way into the plant."

They were halfway down the corridor leading back toward the landing pad when a boy's voice split the mansion's elegant silence. "Hey! Dad!"

The two men stopped and turned. Hurrying toward them was a young boy about twelve years old-Lord Binalie's son Corf, Doriana tentatively identified

him. Behind the boy, walking with a longer stride and a more measured pace, was the final player in the day's scheduled drama: Jedi Knight Jafer Tories.

"Corf," Binalie said, sounding surprised and a little uncomfortable. "I thought you were on weed control this morning."

"We saw the shuttle," Corf explained as he trotted up to his father's side, giving Doriana a quick once-over as he arrived.

"Are you going to the plant?"

"For a few minutes, yes," Binalie said.

"Can I come along?"

Binalie shook his head. "Not this time."

The boy blinked. Clearly, that wasn't the answer he'd been expecting. "Why not?"

"Business," his father said firmly. "Only Master Doriana and I are going."

"But..."

"No arguments," Binalie said sternly, shifting his attention away from Corf as the Jedi reached the group. "I'd like you to meet Jafer Tories, our local Jedi guardian. This is Kinman Doriana, special advisor to Supreme Chancellor Palpatine."

The skin at the corners of the old Jedi's eyes crinkled slightly at Palpatine's name. Small wonder—the Supreme Chancellor and the Jedi Council had been increasingly at odds with each other over the past few months. "Master Tories," Doriana said, nodding.

"I'm glad you're here. As Lord Binalie said, we're going to see the plant. Would you care to accompany us?" Corf looked at his father in surprise. "But you said—"

"Be quiet, Corf," Binalie cut him off, looking at Doriana with some surprise of his own. "I thought you said this was a private matter."

"That was before I knew Master Tories was in the area," Doriana said, gazing into Binalie's face. It would be worth the risk, he decided suddenly, to see just how far the man could be pushed.

"For that matter," he added, "I see no reason why your son shouldn't come, too. You will begin moving him into a management position in a few years, won't you?"

The muscles in Binalie's throat tightened, his eyes narrowing dangerously. Lord Pilester Binalie, the biggest fish in this particular little pond, was unused to having people casually cut the ground out from under him this way.

But Doriana understood power, too. He held Binalie's glare steadily, without challenge or malice, wondering if the other could see far enough past his annoyance to remember whom he was dealing with.

Apparently, he could. "As you wish," he said stiffly. "Follow me."

Torles had been in the Binalies' private tunnel to Spaarti Creations only a handful of times, and it never failed to evoke a sense of wonder. The Cranscoc themselves had burrowed out the long passageway, Lord Binalie had once told him, without the use of any machinery. The result had been a rough-hewn tunnel that perpetually held the rich tang of recently turned dirt.

But despite the fresh aroma, he also knew that in the digging process those same dirt walls had somehow been converted into a material as tough and durable as permacrete. And the apparent roughness of the surface hid the more subtle swirls and delicate patterns the Cranscoc diggers had carved into it.

Functional, artistic, and-by all generally accepted technology-impossible. This was, Tories reflected, a pretty fair description of Spaarti Creations itself.

"The Cranscoc don't want people or vehicles on the strip of grassland between the plant and Foulahn City," Binalie explained to Doriana as the landspeeder slid silently down the tunnel.

"They say it upsets them, though we don't know how or why."

Hence, this tunnel."

"What about the other employees?" Doriana asked. "The non-Cranscoc ones. How do they get to work?"

"Most of them live on-site," Binalie said. "There's a group apartment cluster along the eastern edge of the plant, between the main building and Outlink One, for the unmarried workers.

The Cranscoc have a cluster of homes north of the plant, between Outlinks One and Two, while the non-Cranscoc families live in their own cluster to the north-west, between Outlinks Two and Three."

"And how do all of them get to work?" Doriana persisted. "More tunnels like this one?"

"There are tunnels leading between the main plant and the Outlinks," Binalie said. "But those are mainly for cargo and equipment transfer. The workers usually just walk across the lawns to work."

He smiled slightly at Doriana's puzzled look. "I know.

Apparently, it's only this one strip of land the Cranscoc insist be left completely open. Again, no one knows why."

The tunnel floor began to slope upward, and Tories found himself surreptitiously watching Doriana. The first time he'd taken this trip, he'd naturally expected the tunnel to deposit them into some sort of receiving area, and could still remember his shock when they'd arrived smack in the middle of one of the production areas. It might be instructive to see whether Doriana would also be taken by surprise.

He was. He kept his face impassive as a section of the ceiling lifted like a drawbridge above them and the landspeeder moved up a ramp into the center of the bustling factory, but Tories could sense the flicker of astonishment behind those expressionless eyes. "Interesting endpoint," was all he said as Binalie let the landspeeder coast to a stop

"The Cranscoc like to know what's going on around them," Binalie said, climbing out of his seat as the floor swung shut behind them. "This is

Production Area Four, where we're currently making specialized harvesting equipment for the marshlands of Caamas. The ground there is too interlaced with vineroots for normal equipment to operate without breaking down every other day."

"So you're in the business of filling niche markets?" Doriana asked.

"Basically," Binalie said, nodding. "There isn't enough of that kind of cultivatable marshland in the Republic to justify setting up a permanent assembly line to make the equipment necessary to farm it. But with the Cranscoc system, we can spend a few days or weeks making everything the Caamasi will need for the next year or two, then retool and move on to other projects."

"And where does all this magic retooling take place?" Doriana asked.

"It starts at the main control station," Binalie said, pointing toward a round platform rising two meters off the floor between two of the assembly lines. "The one for this area is over there."

They crossed to the platform, Binalie guiding his guests through the maze of conveyers, transport carts, and human and alien workers. Climbing up the steps, they found themselves beside a long console that had always reminded Tories of a cross between an elongated volcano and a very muddy hillside, with a segmented waterfall of pale green paste oozing ponderously and continually along various sections of the slope. In front of the collecting basin lounged five Cranscoc, their chitinous outer shells gleaming in the sunbeams streaming in through the skylight three floors directly above them. Their long, multi-jointed legs tapped out syncopated rhythms on the thick grass that covered the entire top of the platform, keeping time to music apparently only they could hear. "These are five of the Cranscoc twillers," Binalie said, keeping his voice low. "Whatever they do to that fluid flow will affect most of those machines you can see."

"They can do all the retooling from here?" Doriana asked.

"No, each machine needs its own adjustments," Binalie told him.

"There are roving twillers assigned to each area for that purpose. Depending on the complexity involved, a given production area can be retooled in anywhere from two to eight hours."

"Your basic overnight alterations," Doriana said, nodding.

"Very literally overnight," Binalie agreed. "The Cranscoc will do minor adjustments during the daylight hours-that's why this group is on duty, in case one of the machines drifts off true and needs to be recalibrated. But they'll only do a major retooling after it's completely dark outside."

"And you don't know why?"

"Frankly, we know next to nothing about the Cranscoc," Binalie admitted. "They breathe oxygen, their diet is mostly local vegetables and grains, except that it all has to be enriched with extra magnesium and cobalt, and they like to farm and dig and create artistic objects."

"Fortunately, marshland farm equipment falls into that last category?"

"Farm equipment and everything else," Binalie said. "They seem to love using Spaarti to make things." He led them back down to the main floor. "You say this is Production Area Four," Doriana said. "How many others are there?"

"We currently have twenty-seven operating areas," Binalie told him. "Eight of them are larger and more complex than this one, while the others are comparable or a bit smaller."

"I'd like to see one of the larger ones."

Binalie's lips compressed briefly, but he merely nodded. "Of course. This way."

They visited two other lines before Doriana decided he'd seen enough. "That will do," he said as Binalie started to lead them on to the next area. "Is there an office where we can talk more privately?"

Binalie frowned sideways at him. "What is there to talk about?" he asked, his voice dark with suspicion. "Surely you see now that this technique can't be duplicated elsewhere."

"A private office, if you please?" Doriana repeated.

Binalie took a deep breath - "And it may be best if the boy leaves us now," Doriana added.

Binalie's eyes hardened. Suddenly, it seemed, he'd had enough of being led around by the nose. "I have no secrets from my son, Doriana," he bit out. "If you have anything to say to me, you can say it in his presence."

Doriana let his lip twitch, as if he hadn't finessed the other into precisely this result. "If you insist," he said.

Binalie nodded shortly. "In here."

He led the way to a room marked "Schematic Plotting," ordered out the human and Duros who'd been working on a pair of large plotting boards inside, and keyed the door closed behind them.

Swinging one of the two chairs around for his visitor, he hiked himself up into a half-sitting, half-leaning posture against one of the boards. "Let's hear it," he said gruffly.

"It's quite simple," Doriana said, sitting down and gazing calmly up at the man now towering over him. "As you say, Spaarti Creations is one of a kind. Since we can't duplicate it, we'll have to use it as is."

Binalie's expression didn't even twitch. Clearly, he'd already guessed where this whole visit was going. "Impossible," he said.

"This is the single viable business of an entire sub-minority species - the Cranscoc - and as such comes under Senate Directive 422. Governmental interference with its operation is strictly and expressly forbidden."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures," Doriana countered, pulling a datacard from an inside pocket. "Senate Directive 3591, authorizing Supreme Chancellor Palpatine unlimited authority to commandeer any resource or group of resources he feels necessary for a swift conclusion of hostilities."

He held the card out to Binalie. "Beginning this evening, Spaarti Creations will be turning its complete facilities over to the manufacture of a new design of cloning tanks."

Slowly, Binalie took the datacard and slid it into his datapad.

For a long minute, the only sound in the room was the muted din of the assembly line floor outside the office's transparent canopy as he read and reread the directive. "You can't do this," he said when he finally tore his eyes away from the text.

"Weren't you listening to what I said back in my office? You take over Spaarti, and it'll just be a matter of time before the Separatists move in."

"Point one: you have no choice in the matter," Doriana said, letting his voice harden. "The Senate's directive is clear, and the Supreme Chancellor's decision has been made. Point two: there's no reason for the Separatists to hear anything about this. If we do our job properly, no one will know that crates marked farm equipment or tunneling gear actually contain cloning cylinders. As for my presence on here, I've already established the cover story that I'm intervening on Emil Kerseage's behalf."

"What about my workers?" Binalie countered. "Not counting the twillers, we employ nearly thirteen thousand humans and aliens here. How are you going to guarantee that they all keep quiet?"

"They can't talk about what they don't know," Doriana said. "And in approximately four hours you'll be pulling every one of them off the floor and confining them to their homes."

"Oh, I will, will I?" Binalie said sarcastically. "And how exactly do you expect me to justify that?"

"No justification needed," Doriana said calmly. "Medical quarantine is required by law for an outbreak of plyridian fever."

Binalie's mouth dropped open a centimeter. "Plyridian fev...?" His eyes darted to the canopy. "What have you done?"

"Calm yourself, Lord Binalie," Doriana soothed. 'The three humans and two aliens I treated as we passed - '

"You did what!" Binalie snarled. "You deliberately infected them?"

"I said calm yourself," Doriana repeated, putting an edge to his voice. "Of course I didn't infect anyone. The incubation period for plyridian fever is four weeks. What I did do is give them something that will mimic the disease, creating a convincing set of symptoms. They're not in any danger, and neither is anyone else. But no one will know that for at least those four weeks." Binalie had the look of someone chewing on a sour mifka. "And while they're all in quarantine, you'll naturally be offering me a caretaker unit?" he growled.

"It's that or close down the plant entirely," Doriana pointed out. 'The Cranscoc, being cold-blooded, are immune from plyridian fever, so they can continue to work as usual.'

"This is completely unconscionable," Tories spoke up from the corner of the room.

Doriana had been wondering when the Jedi would say something.

Irreverently, he wondered if perhaps the old man had dozed off and missed some of the conversation. "Excuse me?" he asked, swiveling to face the old man.

"This is a gross violation of every accepted standard of behavior," Tories insisted. "I cannot and will not stand by and be a party to it."

"This is war, Master Tories," Doriana reminded him. "Not only war, but a war of survival. If we lose, the Republic is finished."

"I don't care," Tories said flatly. "I can tell you right now the Jedi Council will not stand by and allow you to terrify the people of Cartao with fear of a nonexistent plague."

"Perhaps the Jedi Council sees things differently than you do," Doriana said, pulling a second datacard from his pocket. "Here are their instructions, ordering you to cooperate with me and my people."

He lifted his eyebrows. "You do still acknowledge the authority of the Council, don't you?"

Silently, with the same complete lack of enthusiasm with which Lord Binalie had taken the first datacard, Tories accepted the second. "Good," Doriana said briskly, getting to his feet. "Then all that remains is for you to return home and prepare for five of your workers to suddenly slump over with dizziness and fever."

"And you, I suppose, will do all the rest?" Binalie said bitterly.

"Of course," Doriana said. "That's why I'm here."

The first worker began complaining of dizziness at precisely five minutes after the predicted time. Nine minutes after that, as he was being examined by the plant medic, he suddenly collapsed, twitching and groaning. The second worker was more stoic, and was still at his station fifteen minutes later when he hit the floor. Three minutes after that, Lord Binalie ordered the plant evacuated.

"Ah-Doriana," the stolid face hovering above Doriana's holoprojector greeted him. "You have news?"

"The plant is ready, Commander Roshton," Doriana said. "You may land at your convenience."

"Excellent," Roshton said approvingly. "And in less than one day. You do admirable work."

"I do what the Supreme Chancellor commands," Doriana said with just a hint of warning. In these days of turmoil and suspicion, it never hurt to remind people as to where his loyalties lay.

"No more; no less."

"Of course," Roshton agreed calmly. "As do we all."

"Yes," Doriana agreed, glancing out the office canopy at the darkening skylight halfway across the room. "It's nearly nightfall, which is when the Cranscoc do all their serious work."

How soon can I expect your people?"

"The first transport's on its way, with the chief techs and operational schematics aboard," Roshton said. "They'll be there in an hour."

"Good," Doriana said. "I'll make sure the Cranscoc are ready."

They've already been informed they'll be doing a complete retooling tonight."

"Are you sure a two-thousand-unit contingent will be enough?" Roshton asked, his forehead wrinkling slightly. "I've been doing some research myself, and it looks to me like the plant usually requires over six times that number. "

"We're supposed to be a caretaker unit," Doriana reminded him.

"It wouldn't look right if we completely repopulated the plant."

"Yes, but..."

"Besides, the majority of those thirteen thousand workers are involved with maintenance, shipping, and raw material movement," Doriana cut him off. "If the Supreme Chancellor decides to extend the operation, we can bring in personnel to handle those aspects. For now, let's concentrate on our mission: to create and stockpile the cloning cylinders we need to create more troops."

"Yes, sir," Roshton muttered. "You'll have your schematics in an hour, with the rest of the transports following at thirty-minute intervals."

"I'll look forward to seeing them, Commander," Doriana said.

"Doriana out."

He broke the connection, lowering the holoprojector into his lap as he again looked out of the office. It was an eerie feeling, sitting alone in the middle of such a huge room. Rather like being the last living cell in a dead body, he thought.

Across by the area's control platform, a small motion caught his eye. A group of Cranscoc were wandering around, their footsteps seeming to stutter as they

walked. Still beating out their silent music, he decided, perhaps humming along on auditory wavelengths humans couldn't hear.

Strange aliens. Strange technology. But apart from that, a very straightforward job. Lifting his holoprojector again, he punched in a new code.

The connection this time took considerably longer to make.

Doriana forced himself to wait patiently, watching the panes of the distant skylight fading toward black.

And then, with a suddenness that somehow always startled him, the ghostly hologram image appeared. "Report," the hooded figure ordered quietly.

"The Spaarti Creations plant has been cleared, Lord Sidious," Doriana said. "The first Republic techs will be landing in an hour, with the rest of the techs, workers, and troops arriving during the night"

"How many troops will there be?"

Doriana hesitated. "I'm not sure," he admitted, bracing himself.

Darth Sidious didn't like it when his people didn't have all the answers to his questions. "Palpatine gave that part of the planning to Commander Roshton, and he's been very secretive about his contingent's exact makeup. It can't be more than a thousand clone troopers, possibly as low as five hundred, with Roshton and a few other officers in command."

To his relief, Sidious merely nodded. "Roshton has ambitions of his own, and thinks he knows how to play the game," he said contemptuously. "No matter. Even a thousand troops will not be a problem. What of the owner and the Jedi?"

"They're not happy, but they've bowed to the inevitable," Doriana said. "The only problem may come if Torges decides to check with the Jedi Council directly to confirm the order. They weren't enthusiastic about the idea in the first place, as I told you, and if he catches Yoda or Windu at a bad moment, one of them might decide to unilaterally reverse the decision."

"Even if they so dared, all Tories can do at this point is make noise," Sidious assured him, a malicious edge to his voice. "No, all is going according to plan. You have done well."

"Thank you, my lord," Doriana said, feeling the warmth of relief and pride trickling through him. "Any new orders?"

"Not yet," Sidious said. "Continue as you are, and allow the plan to work itself out." He smiled sardonically. "Report again when things become interesting."

"I will, my lord," Doriana promised.

The hooded head nodded, and the image vanished.

Taking a deep breath, Doriana stood up, sliding the holoprojector back into its belt pouch. So the chance cube had been thrown, and the game was in motion. The next move would be the Republic's.

He paused in the office doorway, listening to the heavy silence and thinking, as he always did at moments like this, about the incredibly thin tightrope he had chosen to walk. Palpatine had no idea that his trusted aide and advisor was in fact the agent of a Dark Lord of the Sith, working in the shadows to destroy everything the Supreme Chancellor stood for. If Palpatine ever discovered the truth...

He shook his head firmly. No, that would never happen. Sidious was too powerful, and Doriana himself too clever, to ever allow such a useful relationship to be ruined.

He headed across the empty floor, his footsteps echoing from the high ceiling. Binalie would be waiting at the plant's main entrance for the incoming Republic force. The honored representative of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine should be waiting with him.

"It's not fair," Corf grouched, throwing a small stone at a group of flutteries darting among a cluster of flowers at the crest of the hill. "How can they just come in and take over like this?"

"We're in the middle of a war," Tories reminded him.

"Everyone has to make sacrifices."

"I'll bet you Palpatine isn't making any sacrifices," Corf said with a sniff, picking up another stone and heaving it after the first.

Tories reached out to the Force, and the stone stopped abruptly in midair. "I understand that you're angry, Corf," he reproved the boy, lowering the stone to the ground. "But that's no reason to take it out on innocent flutteries."

Corf hissed between his teeth. "I know," he conceded reluctantly, looking up into the cloudless sky. "It's just that-well, look; here comes another one. "

Tories peered upward. In the distance a black speck had appeared, dropping from space toward them. "Look on the bright side," he suggested. "Maybe it's a transport coming to take them all away."

"Yeah. Right," Corf grunted, stooping and picking up another stone. Tories watched him warily, but the boy merely began fiddling with it. "Dad would have said something if they were about to clear out. Or at least he'd have started smiling again.

Besides, it's only been a week, and that fancy-pants Doriana said they'd be here for four."

"Master Doriana," Tories corrected him automatically. "And you shouldn't always look on the negative side of things.

Considering the progress they're making, they could very well decide to cut their time short."

"Why would they?" Corf countered. "If they're getting so much done, why quit?"

That was a good question, Tories had to admit. And if he could come up with a good answer, he might actually be able to argue Doriana onto precisely that path.

Think, Jedi, he admonished himself. After all, mediation had been his primary job for the past thirty years. Surely, he could come up with a way to hammer a compromise out of this situation.

And then, suddenly, he had it. Maybe. "Where's your father?" he asked.

"In the plant," Corf said, frowning up at him. "What is it?"

"Maybe the right lever to use on Doriana," Tories said, pulling out his comlink.

"Master Doriana."

"I stand corrected," Tories said dryly as he keyed in Lord Binalie's frequency.

"So what's the plan?" Corf asked. "Come on, tell me."

"What's the possibility that has to concern Master Doriana the most?" Tories asked rhetorically. "Answer: that the Separatists will find out about this and move in to stop it."

"Okay," Corf agreed, frowning. "So?"

"So all we have to do is convince him that four weeks will be pushing his luck," Tories said, frowning in turn. The comlink seemed to be taking an unusually long time to connect. "Because if the Separatists do figure it out, Spaarti is lost to him forever. Dooku's people will blockade Cartao, and that'll be the end of it."

Corf made a face. "Yuck."

"Yuck, indeed," Tories agreed. "If, on the other hand, Doriana takes this in small bites, sneaking his people in for just a few days at a time, he may be able to keep the whole process going indefinitely."

"You mean he'd be taking over the plant once every month or so?" Corf asked doubtfully. "Boy. I don't think Dad'll go for that."

"He will if it comes to a choice between Doriana's annoyances and a Separatist blockade," Tories said, turning the comlink off and then on again, the skin on the back of his neck starting to tingle. Something was very wrong here...

He caught his breath, twisting his head to look upward as he silently cursed his lack of attention. The black speck they'd seen earlier was much closer, dropping toward them like an impatient asteroid.

And at this distance, Tories could now see the ship's ail-too distinctive double-winged silhouette.

"What is that?" Corf asked, his voice tight.

"A Trade Federation C-9979 landing ship," Tories bit out, jabbing one last useless time at his comlink's controls.

"Oh, no," Corf breathed, fumbling at his belt for his own comlink. "We have to warn Dad!"

"We can't," Tories told him, shoving his comlink back into its pouch. "They've knocked out the system."

"Then we have to get over there," Corf said, turning back toward the house. "Come on."

"Wait a minute," Tories said, catching the boy's arm, his mind racing. By the time they made it back to the house and down the tunnel, the invasion would be well underway. What they needed was some way to send a message now to the people inside.

"What?" Corf demanded. "Come on."

"Quiet," Tories ordered him. "Let me think." Above them, the C-9979 settled into a high hover position directly over the plant, and perhaps twenty tiny craft erupted from its leading wing.

STAPs, he recognized them: nimble flying platforms carrying a single battle droid each. They swept outward from the landing ship in ever-increasing spirals, searching for defenses or other threats that might interfere with a landing or troop deployment.

And three of them were at this very minute flying over the forbidden stretch of grassland between the Binalie estate and Spaarti Creations....

It was a long shot, he knew, in every sense of the word. But it was all he had. Pulling out his lightsaber, he ignited it and locked the activation stud, picking out the STAP that seemed to be drifting the closest to where he and Corf were standing.

Judging the droid's speed and distance as best he could, he stretched out to the Force and hurled his lightsaber toward it.

The droid, its attention on the ground around the plant, probably never even saw it coming. The spinning weapon shot across its STAP, the brilliant green blade slicing through the power cell housing just above the footlocks. With a flat electronic exclamation of surprise, the droid and machine dropped out of the sky and thudded to the ground.

The other droids reacted instantly, two of the STAPs swinging around toward their downed comrade, metallic heads swiveling back and forth as they searched for the source of the attack.

"Run," Tories ordered Corf as he called the lightsaber back toward him. "Back to the house and the safe room. We've done everything we can here."

"But what about Dad?" Corf asked anxiously, moving a couple of reluctant steps down the hill.

"I'll take one of the landspeeders down the tunnel as soon as you're safe," Tories told him. The droids had spotted him now, and the STAPs' twin blasters were starting to track. "Go on-I'll be right behind you."

A pair of blaster bolts shot past them, uncomfortably close.

"All right," Corf said, finally turning and taking off. "But I'm going with you," he shouted back over his shoulder. "The landspeeders won't work without someone from the family in them."

The lightsaber made it back to Tories' hand about half a second before the droids finally found the range. But for a Jedi, half a second was more than enough. The lightsaber blurred in his grip, twisting like a hunting makthier as it intercepted the blaster bolts and sent them bouncing back again. A pair of volleys later, there were three ruined STAPs and droids lying crumpled in the forbidden zone.

Closing down his lightsaber, Tories turned and ran, following the boy now halfway to the mansion. He'd done all he could to warn those inside the plant. Now it was time to join them.

He could only hope he would be there ahead of the droids.

I hope you realize just how incredible this is," Commander Roshton commented as he handed the datapad back to the tech.

"We'd projected that the raw materials we'd stockpiled would last the full four weeks. In actual fact, at current production rates we're going to have to resupply after two."

"I'm not surprised," Doriana said. "Sparti Creations already had something of a reputation for doing the impossible."

"It's an incredible resource, Lord Binalie," Roshton agreed, turning toward Binalie. "You should be very proud." Binalie didn't answer. He'd been increasingly silent lately, Doriana had noted, as he watched his beloved manufacturing plant turning out rows and rows of cloning tanks.

Roshton either hadn't noticed or didn't care. "I don't know if Master Doriana mentioned it, but these are a more advanced model of cloning tank than the design they used on Kamino," the commander went on, turning his head slowly as he surveyed the bustling assembly area. "That's the main problem with keeping yourselves isolated; you don't keep up with modern technological advances. These should be able to turn out clones in a tenth of the time the Kaminoans needed to do the job. We get a few million of these on-line, and the Separatists can kiss their precious droid armies good-bye."

He frowned suddenly. "What's going on with them?"

"Who?" Doriana asked, following the other's line of sight to the area's control platform. The five Cranscocs on duty were vibrating like a set of bad repulsorlifts, their hides flickering with rapid color changes beneath the translucent coatings.

"Something's wrong," Binalie declared, snapping out of his sulk.

Brushing past Roshton, he sprinted to the platform, taking the stairs two at a time.

He was leaning over the nearest alien when Doriana and Roshton caught up with him, his eyes narrowed as he studied the alien's changing color pattern. Up close, Doriana could see that the alterations were more varied and subtle than he'd realized.

"They're upset about something," Binalie muttered. "A violation of some taboo..."

"You can read that?" Roshton asked. "I didn't realize they could..."

"Shut up," Doriana cut him off. Roshton turned a glare toward him - 'The grassland,' Binalie said abruptly. "Someone or something is on the south grassland strip."

"Is that all?" Roshton said, sounding disgusted. "Probably some stupid kid from the city."

"No," Binalie insisted. "Everyone in this part of Cartao knows better. It's either your people..."

He broke off, looking sharply at Doriana. "Or the Separatists," Doriana finished for him, grabbing for his comlink. "Commander: full alert."

"Ridiculous," Roshton insisted. But he had his comlink out and was tapping at the key. "How could they have?..."

"I'm not getting anything," Doriana said, trying another channel. "Commander?"

"They've been blocked," Roshton said, the skepticism abruptly gone from his voice.

"What do we do?" Binalie asked nervously, looking around as if he expected to see a droid army clawing its way up out of the drainage grilles.

"We prepare to meet the enemy," Roshton said, his voice icy calm. Drawing his blaster, he aimed it at the ceiling and squeezed the trigger.

Even amid the loud auditory mosaic of factory noises, the distinctive sizzle of a stun blast easily cut through the noise.

Roshton fired three more times, paused, then fired twice.

Doriana strained his ears. From the next chamber over, he heard the faint sound of an answering signal. 'The alert's being passed,' Roshton said, putting away his comlink but keeping his blaster in his hand. "Come on-my command center's in the next assembly area."

A clone trooper lieutenant and the senior master tech were waiting when the three of them arrived at the command center, the former standing stiffly to attention, and the latter looking almost comical as he nervously shuffled his weight back and forth between his feet. "Report," Roshton ordered, glancing at the status schematic that showed troop disposition.

"One Trade Federation C-9979 currently hovering over the plant," the lieutenant replied. "Approximately twenty STAPs running air support; three have crashed to the south. One Trade Federation Lucrehulk-class control core ship has appeared over the horizon.

No other vehicles currently in detection range."

"How bad?" Binalie murmured.

"Bad enough," Roshton told him. "A single C-9979 can carry eleven MTT large-transport vehicles, with a hundred twelve battle droids each, and a hundred fourteen AAT battle tanks.

Plus, the core ship up there probably has another couple more C-9979s in reserve if they get impatient."

Binalie had actually gone pale. "You're saying there could be over three thousand battle droids out there? Plus all those tanks?"

"Actually, if you add in the AAT crews, we're talking more like five thousand droids," Doriana murmured.

"So five thousand droids," Binalie bit out. "And you have, what, nine hundred men?"

Roshton smiled tightly. "I have nine hundred clone troopers," he corrected. "There's a big difference. Lieutenant, do we have spotters in position?"

"All doors are being watched," the clone trooper confirmed.

"Whenever they put down, we'll know it."

"Fortunately, there aren't many possibilities," Roshton murmured, looking at his status board again. "The east and west doors are the only ones with the kind of clearance outside that a C-9979 needs."

"Agreed," the lieutenant said. "The troops are currently layering at both of them."

"What does that mean, layering?" Binalie asked.

"They're forming successive defensive lines from those doors inward," Roshton told him. "What about the north and northwest entrances? We're not leaving them unprotected, are we?"

"Wait a minute," Binalie interrupted again. "Defensive lines inside the plant? You can't fight in here."

"Well, we sure can't fight outside," Roshton pointed out. "Not without air support."

"Then you're not fighting at all," Binalie said flatly. "The equipment in here is delicate and irreplaceable." Roshton snorted. "You'd rather just turn your plant over to the Separatists?"

"If those are my only two options, yes," Binalie said, his voice icy. "Maybe you don't understand what this plant means to Cartao and the rest of the sector..."

"Just a minute," the lieutenant cut him off, his helmet cocking slightly to the side. "They've lifted the comlink blocking."

Broadcasting a message on all public channels."

Roshton already had his comlink out. "...ublic forces," a typically oily Neimoidian voice came from the speaker. "You are surrounded and outnumbered. Surrender, or we will be forced to destroy you."

"I've heard that before," Roshton countered, giving a set of hand signals to the lieutenant. The other nodded and turned away, and Doriana could hear the faint sound of his voice through his helmet as he gave rapid orders. "But I'll humor you."

What do you want?"

"We want Spaarti Creations," the Neimoidian said. "You will all step outside the west door and lay down your weapons..."

Roshton switched off the comlink. "West door," he told the lieutenant.

"Confirmed," the other replied. "The C-9979 is setting down in the cleared area between the forest and the plant. We're shifting troops to respond."

Roshton nodded. "Let's go."

Binalie caught his arm as he started to leave. "Commander, I won't let you fight in my plant," he warned. "If necessary, I'll open the doors to them myself."

"You do and you'll be executed for treason," Roshton growled, shaking off his hand.

Binalie turned to Doriana, his face twisted with frustration.

"Doriana?"

"Lord Binalie is right, Commander," Doriana said. "Spaarti Creations is too valuable to risk damaging it."

Roshton turned furious eyes on him - "But at the same time, Lord Binalie, Commander Roshton cannot simply let his civilians fall into enemy hands," Doriana went on. "I'm afraid I don't see a clear answer here."

Binalie's lips compressed into a thin, bloodless line. "What if I take the techs through the tunnel to my house?" he suggested.

"Can you hold the droids off-outside-long enough for me to get them all clear?"

"We can try," Roshton said, studying his face a moment and then turning to the senior tech. "Get your people to Assembly Area Four for evacuation. Lieutenant, let's go."

The two of them headed across the floor toward the west door at a fast run. Doriana waited long enough to make sure Binalie and the senior tech were indeed making for Area Four, then set off after the soldiers.

It was, after all, only proper that he should at least stay long enough to watch such brave soldiers begin their last battle.

The "west door" was in fact more like a major vehicle hangar than a simple doorway, consisting of a large transfer room behind a pair of sliding doors big enough to handle anything a modern manufacturing plant could ever need. Doriana reached the transfer room to find that the huge doors had been opened a crack, with Roshton and the lieutenant peering through the gap.

Throughout the transfer room hundreds of white-armored clone troopers were moving purposefully around, settling into positions near the doors and behind some of the heavy crate-moving vehicles parked along the walls, or setting up a semicircle of tripod-mounted laser cannon on the floor a dozen meters back from the doors. "What's happening?" he asked as he crossed to Roshton.

"They've landed," Roshton said, sounding distracted as he peered out the crack. He had donned a clone trooper comlink headset, Doriana noted; probably listening to a running status commentary from the rest of his officers. "Doing their little sensor scans to make sure the ground is clear of mines."

"What's the plan?" Doriana asked, taking a cautious peek between the doors. Even set firmly on the ground, the landing ship loomed over them like an angry metal storm cloud.

"We stop them, of course," Roshton said shortly. "At the very least, we make them pay dearly for every square centimeter."

"What are you talking about?" Doriana asked, frowning. "Weren't you listening back there? You can't fight in here." Roshton swiveled his head to look at him. "I thought you just said that to get Binalie off our backs."

"Absolutely not," Doriana said. "My position was exactly as stated. We can't allow the techs to fall into Separatist hands-they know too much about our technology. But neither can we allow the plant to be damaged."

"So what you're saying is that I should move out into the open?" Roshton demanded bluntly. "That I should stand there and watch my troops get slaughtered just to buy Binalie time to evac the techs?"

"I'm sorry," Doriana said in a low, sincere voice. "I know that puts you in an impossible position. But I'm afraid we have no choice."

"We blasted well do have a choice," Roshton snapped. "And if you think..." He paused. "What? All right, put him on."

"What is it?" Doriana asked.

"Your Jedi's arrived, along with Binalie's son," Roshton said briefly. "Master Tories? Yes, this is Roshton."

For perhaps half a minute he listened, his forehead wrinkled in concentration. Then, surprisingly, he smiled. "Understood," he said. "We'll give it a try. Lieutenant?"

"I'm on it, sir," the clone trooper said.

Roshton turned back to Doriana. "Maybe we do have a choice," he said. "Defense line, configure for inverse hailstorm; target on my command. And get these doors open."

With a ponderous rumble, the heavy doors began to slide slowly to the sides. "Time to get to cover, Doriana," Roshton said, gesturing to the side. "This way."

A few seconds later they were crouched behind a large cargo truck parked along the side wall. "What's going on?" Doriana asked, trying to keep his sudden misgivings out of his voice.

This was suddenly not going the way he'd planned. "Won't this open us up to a full-scale assault?"

"It might," Roshton agreed. "Or it might let us come up with a different ending for this game."

That sounded distinctly ominous. "Is this what the Jedi said to do?" Doriana probed carefully.

"No, this part was my idea," Roshton said. "Master Tories simply reminded me of another of our objectives." He craned his neck.

"There they go."

Doriana eased an eye around the truck's push plate. Outside, the C-9979's heavy clamshell deployment doors were swinging open, the foot ramp starting to slide down toward the ground. In the relative darkness behind the doors, he could see the slightly bulbous nose and blaster cannon of a MTT armored droid transport waiting in the landing pedestal. "Stand by," Roshton ordered calmly. "Target is starboard laser capacitor."

Doriana frowned; but before he could ask, the MTT gave a brief snort of cooling system ground vents and began to slide forward toward the ramp.

"Fire," Roshton said calmly.

And with a thunder of weaponry that echoed deafeningly through the huge room, the clone troopers opened fire.

Doriana squinted into the glare as the hundreds of energy weapons focused their fury on the thick armor behind the MTT's leftmost blaster cannon ball turret, wincing at the noise and the waves of heat that rolled over him. The MTT's armor was incredibly thick, he knew, but the transport's designers could never have anticipated a situation where so much firepower would be focused on such a small spot. The sun-bright glare around the power capacitor began to diffuse outward as the casehardened metal alloy vaporized into superheated plasma...

And barely two seconds into the assault, the Republic weapons burned through the armor to the high-energy capacitor behind it.

The entire left front of the MTT vanished in a gigantic fireball that writhed its way upward to billow across the leading edge of the C-9979's forward wing. A series of smaller blasts erupted from behind the first as secondary systems went up in a chain reaction. A few seconds later, with an earsplitting scream, the repulsorlifts disintegrated, and the blackened shell that had once been a fully loaded MTT collapsed onto the ramp.

Completely blocking the vehicles waiting behind it.

"That's it!" Roshton shouted over the pandemonium, a savage grin on his face. "All units withdraw!" He grabbed Doriana's arm.

"Come on, Doriana."

They didn't stop running until they were two assembly areas into the plant and the noise outside had faded to a dull roar.

"Clever," Doriana said, breathing hard as Roshton slowed them down to a fast jog. "You block the exit ramp, and they're stymied until they can clear out the wreckage. But what exactly did it gain you?"

"Options, of course," Roshton told him, glancing back over his shoulder. Doriana looked, too, to see the clone troopers following in an orderly retreat. "Before we did that, there would have been no way to retreat without bringing the battle into the plant, which you had forbidden us to do. We would have had to stand and die."

He gestured ahead of them with his blaster. "Now, we should have time to get through that tunnel of Binalie's and go to ground." Doriana felt his lip twist. Nine hundred clone troopers, ready and waiting to harass the Separatist army. This was not how it was supposed to have gone. "So what exactly did Tories tell you?"

Roshton threw him a smile. "You'll see. Come on, and save your breath for running."

They stood on the hill at the edge of the Binalie estate: Tories, Binalie himself, Doriana, and Commander Roshton, the latter now disguised in civilian clothing. "So that's it, is it?" Binalie asked.

"For now, yes," Tories told him, gazing across the grassy strip that lay between them and Spaarti Creations as the pinks and yellows of sunset began to fade from the western sky.

And the shadows from the smoldering hulks of half a dozen AAT battle tanks stretched across the forbidden grassland. "My compliments to your gunners," he added.

"It wasn't hard," Roshton said grimly. "Standard Trade Federation attack procedure always includes throwing a cordon around the target zone. All we had to do was set our ambush and make sure we dropped the ones in the place that would irritate the Cranscoc the most."

"Yes," Tories murmured, feeling a twinge of guilt. It had been his idea, and it had been necessary. But he still didn't much like the fact that he'd deliberately caused distress and discomfort to sentient beings. Especially sentient beings who had nothing to do with the chaos now swirling around them.

"I just hope it works," Doriana murmured.

"It will," Tories assured him. "The twillers aren't even going to be able to relax until those hulks are removed, let alone retool the plant for anything the Separatists want to build in there."

Roshton grunted. "Let's hope they don't figure it out until our reinforcements get here," he said. "Then we'll see how good they are."

"As long as you don't destroy the plant in the process," Binalie warned.

"We'll do what we can," Roshton promised. "But that's up to the Separatists now."

Tories felt his throat tighten, the fading light in the sky mirroring his own darkening mood. Because even if Spaarti survived, the thing he'd feared for so long had already happened.

The war had come to Cartao.

Coming to a midair halt above the kilometer-wide grassy strip separating the Spaarti Creations manufacturing plant from the northern edge of the Binalie family estate, the heavy cargo lifters began lowering their magnetic grapples. Kinman Dorianan couldn't see the ground beneath them from his position - the estate's hills were blocking his view-but he could guess that they were hovering over the last of the shattered war machines that had ended up there in the aftermath of the Separatists' assault on the plant two days earlier.

At least, Dorianan thought unkindly, the Neimoidians commanding the occupying droid army had learned not to simply drive cleanup vehicles onto that forbidden stretch of grassland. Glancing around to make sure the copse of trees he was standing in wasn't under observation, he pulled out his holoprojector and keyed in the contact code.

The connecting light blinked on as the device linked first to the local comlink central switching office, then to his personal ship and its special HoloNet node, then across the vast expanse of the Republic to one of the dozen HoloNet nodes on Coruscant, and finally to the private desk of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine himself. Dorianan watched the lifters as he waited, wondering if Palpatine would be there or out at yet another meeting.

The image of the most recognized face in the galaxy appeared in the air above the holoprojector. "Master Dorianan," Palpatine said, nodding to his advisor. "You have good news?"

"Just the opposite, I'm afraid," Dorianan admitted. "The Separatists are still holding Spaarti Creations, and they seem to have finally figured out that vehicles or people on the plant's southern border upset the Cranscok twillers inside. They're clearing the last of the debris off the grassland now, and my guess is that by tonight they'll be able to get the plant retooled for whatever it is they want to build in there."

"Not a pleasant thought," Palpatine said gravely. "Are you familiar with the D-90 project?"

"No," Doriana said. "Is it one of ours?" Palpatine's lip twisted. "Hardly. It's an experimental combat droid, reputed to be as tough as the Trade Federation's D-60 assault droid, but more versatile."

"I see," Doriana said. The D-60 was a hulking, man-and-a-half-size version of the super battle droids the Trade Federation had debuted at the Battle of Geonosis. "How much more versatile?"

"Considerably," Palpatine said. "They'll be coordinated in small teams instead of entire army blocks so that they can be used as commando units as well as simple battlefield shock troops."

"An unpleasant thought, indeed," Doriana said. So, the Separatists finally had a new weapon on the plotting board. About time. "You think they've come here to begin production?"

"That's what our Intelligence people believe," Palpatine said. "Personally, I suspect there are still some system flaws and that they hope to use Spaarti to test and finalize the design. What's the current military situation?"

"For the moment, basically stalemated," Doriana told him. "Commander Roshton and his clone troopers have gone to ground, some of them here on Lord Binalie's estate, the rest dispersed elsewhere. They've been harassing the droids wherever possible, but the Separatists have mostly been staying inside where we can't get at them without risking damage to the plant. "

"Which neither we nor they want," Palpatine said. "What about the techs?"

"Binalie has a secret safe room-basically a shielded sub-sub-basement-that connects with the tunnel to the plant," Doriana said. "The techs are hidden down there."

"Communications?"

"The Separatists are still blocking the local comm system and the HoloNet node," Doriana told him. "But Roshton's reconfigured their comlinks somehow to get around it. They'll be able to move quickly if they get the chance."

"Then they shall have it," Palpatine said. "A Republic light cruiser is on its way with the necessary firepower to destroy the control ship orbiting above you."

Once the droid army is helpless, I trust Commander Roshton won't have any trouble with the Neimoidian overseers and their techs."

"I'm sure he won't," Doriana agreed. "When can we expect this ship?"

"Possibly as early as tonight," Palpatine said. "Possibly not for another three days. It depends on how much resistance they run into along the way."

"Understood," Doriana assured him. "Thank you, Chancellor. We'll look forward to their arrival."

Palpatine gave him a tired smile. The war, Doriana knew, was weighing heavily on him. "Keep me informed."

The image vanished. Doriana broke the connection from his end and looked back at the lifters. They had the blackened hulk of the last ruined war machine in the air now and were towing it back toward the plant.

Planning to dump it elsewhere on the extensive Spaarti grounds, no doubt. Why the alien Cranscoc insisted that this particular stretch of land-and only this particular stretch-be kept unsullied not even Lord Binalie knew. Doriana watched until the lifters and their burden had vanished behind the jutting roof of the Spaarti plant, then keyed a different code into his holoprojector. He'd done his official job, reporting the situation to the man whose office paid him.

Now it was time to do the same for the man who gave him his orders. As usual, it took longer for the holoprojector to make this connection. Doriana cultivated his patience, gazing idly at the sky as he wondered what the Neimoidians were doing inside the plant. Now that the south lawn was clear, they would certainly try tonight to get the Cranscoc twillers to retool the plant. The only question was, which direction would that retooling take? To create the D-90 prototypes, as Palpatine thought? Or were they up to something else? In the distance, he could hear the hum of repulsorlifts... And suddenly, four small transports appeared over the hills between him and Spaarti Creations, a squadron of STAPs flying defensive screening around them, everything moving with the urgency of pilots who knew there were snipers in the area. The whole crowd shot past nearly overhead, then angled downward, the transports abruptly splitting formation and swinging into position on the four sides of the Binalie mansion a kilometer away. With the kind of precision only remote-controlled

droids could achieve, all four dropped simultaneously to the ground. And from the hatches poured military-straight lines of battle droids.

"Report."

With a start, Doriana jerked his attention back to his holoprojector. The hooded image of Darth Sidious hovered over the small projection platform, his expression unreadable. "Your pardon, Lord Sidious," Doriana apologized hastily. "My attention was distracted."

To his relief, Sidious merely smiled thinly. "The Neimoidians have finally made a move?"

"Of a sort, yes," Doriana said, daring to split his attention between his master's image and the activity going on around the mansion below. The battle droids had been joined on the lawn now by a handful of the hulking D-60 assault droids and a pair of droidekas. Most of them settled into a defensive cordon around the mansion, but four of the assault droids were waiting instead just outside the transport nearest the mansion's front door. As he watched, two Neimoidians emerged from the hatch into the protective square of the assault droids and scuttled across the lawn toward the door.

"It looks like they've decided to have a talk with Lord Binalie," he told Sidious. "Will talking be of any use to them?" Doriana shrugged as the group vanished inside.

"Binalie certainly can't get the plant up and running any faster," he said. "Maybe they want him to act as interpreter with the Cranscocs..." he seems to understand that skin-coloration language of theirs. "More likely they're seeking a hostage."

"Possibly," Doriana nodded. "That could be useful, providing Roshton is willing to play along."

"You will make it your business to see that he does," Sidious said bluntly. "That goes for that Jedi, Tories, as well. I don't want either of them making trouble until the Republic task force arrives." Doriana blinked. "You knew about that?"

Another thin smile. "Did you think you were my only source of information, Doriana?"

"Of course not, my lord," Doriana said hastily. Still, he couldn't help but feel a touch of disappointment. He'd rather hoped to deliver that particular tidbit of news himself.

"But information is useful only when someone is in position to exploit it," Sidious continued. "And we cannot allow either the Republic or Separatist forces to damage Spaarti Creations."

"I understand, my lord," Doriana said.

"Good," Sidious said. "Then carry out your orders." The image vanished. Doriana put the holoprojector away. The droids had finished forming their cordon around the mansion, the assault droids holding down the building's corners and entrances while the droidekas rolled watchfully around the perimeter. It didn't look like anyone was going to be getting in or out any time soon.

His eyes drifted across the grounds, wondering how Lord Binalie's employees were reacting to the sudden invasion. But the only person he could see was a quarter of the way around the mansion to the east: a gardener on his knees beside one of the sculpted bushes. Apparently the more observant workers had reacted by hustling themselves out of sight. The gardener looked up, mopping his forehead with a gloved hand...

And Doriana stiffened. That was no gardener.

It was Commander Roshton.

Hissing a curse under his breath, Doriana headed off toward Roshton, walking as quickly as he could without drawing undue attention from the droids, Darth Sidious's warning echoing through his mind. Roshton, the idiot, was going to ruin everything.

"No," Lord Pilester Binalie said firmly. "I'm going to simply sit by and let those monsters take up residence in my plant."

"I understand your frustration," Jafer Tories soothed. "But I'm sure they're not doing any damage in there. They could have destroyed Spaarti from orbit if that was what they'd wanted."

"I know what they want: the same thing Doriana and the Republic want," Binalie growled. "The point is that the longer this silly dance goes on, the greater the chance someone will eventually get careless. When that happens, it'll be the end of Spaarti Creations."

"But the Republic's going to send help, aren't they?" Binalie's twelve-year-old son Corf spoke up from his chair at the other corner of the desk.

"Probably," Binalie told the boy grimly. "But I'm starting to think that more soldiers are the last thing we want." Tories frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said," Binalie growled. "The Republic and Separatists are like a pair of dokriks fighting over a bone. What does it matter which of them is in charge when the plant gets destroyed?"

"So what do you suggest?" Tories asked.

Binalie's lips compressed briefly. "That we get the Separatists out ourselves, now, before Roshton and his clone troopers can regroup to attack. Bribe them, blackmail them-even help them finish their work if they'll promise to get out afterward."

"You can't be serious," Tories protested, frowning. There was a whisper of warning from the Force; a sense of alien minds nearby. "Why not?" Binalie countered. "What are you worried about, Roshton's blatherings about treason? That's nothing but a bunch of-" He stopped as heavy footsteps suddenly sounded outside the office door. "What in the world?" he muttered, starting to rise to his feet.

With a crash, the door was shoved violently inward, the warped panel slamming to the floor and bouncing another two meters across the room.

Binalie dropped back into his chair with a curse, his hand darting toward one of the desk drawers. "No!" Tories snapped, reaching out with the Force to lock the other's arm in place.

He was just in time. Half a second later the monstrous metal shapes of two large combat droids strode into the room, the heavy blasters permanently attached to their forearms lifted and ready. Their heads and weapons swung

once around the room as they searched for danger, and then they moved back to flank the doorway in guard positions.

Through the opening stepped a pair of brightly dressed Neimoidians. The one in the lead wore the blue and purple robes and black miter of a unit commander, while the other wore a simpler outfit of red and purple. His headgear was blue, with four twisted horns atop it. "Good day, Lord Binalie," the commander said in a stilted voice. "I trust we do not intrude?"

Tories looked a silent warning at Binalie, got merely a glare in return. But the other brought his hand up-empty-and let it drop onto the desktop. "Of course not," he growled sarcastically. "It's not like I have any actual work to do. What do you want?"

"Permit me to introduce myself," the spokesman said, sending glances at first Tories and then Corf. "I am Tok Ashel, Commander of the Cartao Expeditionary Army." He gestured to his companion. "This is Dif Gehad, Master Creator of New Products."

"And what new products are you trying to build in my factory?" Binalie asked. Gehad started to speak. - "Not so quickly, Lord Binalie," Ashel interrupted.

"First, let us have the rest of the introductions." His large red eyes turned pointedly to Tories.

"I'm Corf Binalie," Corf spoke up before either of the two men could answer, his voice strong and defiant. "This is my private tutor, Master Jafer. Does this mean there's no school today?"

Ashel made a sound like crumpling tin wrap. "It may, young one," he said, eyeing Tories. "What do you teach, Master Jafer?"

"A little of everything," Tories told him. "Ethics, wisdom, the ways of life."

"Ah-a philosopher," Ashel said, giving a dismissive wave of his hand and turning back to Binalie. "Now, to business." He gestured to Gehad.

"As you have surmised, we wish to use Spaarti Creations to work for us," the Master Creator said, his voice neat and precise. "But thus far we have been unable to restructure the assembly lines. You will tell me now how to do that."

Binalie shook his head. "I can't."

"Do not speak foolishness," Gehad warned. "You are director of this facility. You know everything there is to know about it."

"Of course I do," Binalie agreed. "Including what can and cannot be done. Only the Cranscoc twillers can manipulate the fluid tooling system." He lifted his eyebrows at Gehad. "I take it they haven't been willing to do so?"

"It was the ruins of our vehicles on the south lawn," Ashel said. "We now know about that taboo and have moved to correct it."

"But we do not intend to be stymied in that way again," Gehad added. "So I repeat: you will tell me how we may change the tooling ourselves."

"And I repeat, I can't," Binalie said. "But there are things I can do to help. I'd like to suggest a deal that-"

"You will not block us further!" Ashel snapped, flicking his fingers in an odd and probably obscene gesture. "Not you, and not the Republic forces hiding in the tunnel beneath the southern lawn. Oh, yes, we know they are there-we have tried twice to dislodge them and have now sealed the plant's exit against them. We also know the other end of the tunnel is somewhere on these grounds. Do not deny it!"

"I can't do anything about the Republic forces," Binalie said, starting to sound angry himself. "What I can do, however, is help you..."

"And you will tell us how to restructure the machines," Ashel insisted again, even more stridently this time. "Or you will regret the consequences." The skin of Binalie's face hardened, and even with the masking influence of two alien minds at close range, Tories could feel Binalie's sense harden along with it.

Even the invasion of his home and the destruction of his office door had apparently not put Binalie off the idea of offering the Neimoidians a deal to get them out of his plant. But threats were something else entirely. "And what exactly is that supposed to mean?" he asked, his voice deceptively calm.

"It means this." Before Binalie could do more than inhale sharply, Ashel wrapped his long fingers around Corf's arm and hauled him out of his chair.

"The grub will go with us," the Neimoidian continued, pulling Corf close in front of him. "When you decide to cooperate, you may join us in the plant."

"Let him go," Binalie ground out. He was on his feet now, ignoring the droid blasters suddenly pointed at him. "I've told you already..."

"And do not consider too long," Ashel warned, backing to the door with Corf firmly in tow. The boy's eyes, Tories saw, had gone wide with fear. "We are patient beings, but we will not be patient forever."

Corf threw Tories a half frantic, half pleading look. But the Jedi had already measured the distances with his eyes, and even with the advantage of surprise he knew he couldn't take two combat droids before at least one of them got off a shot. And that didn't even take into account what other forces the Neimoidians might have waiting outside.

Which simply meant he would have to try something else. "Just a moment," he said primly, standing up. "The boy has two exams to complete today. I will not permit my schedule to be disrupted." The Neimoidians paused in the doorway, gazing at him with those expressionless alien faces. Tories stretched out toward their minds, wondering just how susceptible this species was to Jedi suggestion. He'd seldom used this trick, and never before with a Neimoidian. If they didn't buy into his manipulation, he might have to tackle those combat droids after all.

"The boy will come with us," Ashel declared at last. "If you choose, you may come with him."

"Thank you," Tories said, bowing in proper tutor fashion. Throwing a warning glance at Binalie, he stepped over to join the Neimoidians.

"But bring many lessons," Ashel added as they stepped back into the corridor.

There were, Tories noted, two more of the big droids waiting for them out there. Just as well he hadn't gone on the attack. "Lord Binalie is stubborn, even for a human. You may be with us for some time."

"Don't worry," Tories said, squeezing Corf's shoulder reassuringly. "I have everything I'll need."

The two Neimoidians and their assault droid escort were still in the mansion when Doriana finally reached Roshton. The commander was bending over the sculpted bush in front of him, his face carefully turned away from the visitor, puttering away industriously with a set of pruning scissors.

"What are you doing here?" Doriana hissed at him.

"Tendin' the plants, my lord," Roshton said in a quavering old voice, snipping off a couple more leaves.

"Stop it, Roshton," Doriana ground out. "It's me."

Roshton angled an eye cautiously up at him. "Ah-Master Doriana," he said, abandoning both the accent and the phony garden work. "You're just in time for the show."

"What show?" Doriana asked. "What are you doing?"

"You'll see," Roshton said, shifting his eyes to the mansion and the ring of droids. "Ever seen a droideka go bounce?"

"Uh... no."

"Then you've got a treat in store." Roshton pulled the front of his tunic slightly back to reveal a comlink hidden behind the flap. "Number seven, stand by... now."

And from the direction of the house came the thundercrack of an explosion. Doriana twisted around in time to see one of the droidekas, still in wheel form, soaring over the heads of its startled companions. Behind it, a blackened hole in the ground trailed a strand of smoke. "Number ten: now," Roshton said.

There was a second explosion, this one squarely at the feet of one of the assault droids. The big machine lost its balance and toppled backward to land with a sickening thud. "Where are they firing from?" Doriana demanded, looking around in bewilderment. There were no clone troopers in sight, and precious little cover anywhere nearby for them to be hiding in. "Roshton?"

"Later," Roshton said. "Five and eight: go."

Two more explosions ripped into the defensive line, each sending a pair of battle droids flying across the neatly trimmed lawn. "And here come the soft ones," Roshton added as the brightly colored Neimoidian robes appeared in the doorway. "This should be fun."

"Hold it," Doriana said, squinting across the distance. Nearly hidden in the folds of the robes... "Hold your fire, Roshton," he repeated urgently.

"They've got Binalie's son with them."

Roshton muttered something under his breath. "Rotten cowards," he said contemptuously. "They can't just..."

He broke off, a tight smile suddenly twisting his lips. "Well, well. Cowards and fools both."

"What?" Doriana asked, frowning.

"They've got Corf Binalie, all right." Roshton gestured. "They've also got Jafer Tories."

He lifted his eyebrows at Doriana. "Like I said. This should be fun."

Two more explosions, the third and fourth by Tories' count, shook the house as Ashel and Gehad hurried them down the entry hallway to the mansion's main door.

"I do not understand," Gehad said nervously as they peered outside. "Where are they shooting from?"

"What does it matter?" Ashel bit out, gesturing to the droids. "Droids! Form a cordon to the transport!" Obediently, the droids abandoned their encirclement positions, scurrying or rolling or lumbering, as their capabilities allowed, toward the vehicle squatting a dozen meters away. They were lining up into two rows, their weapons pointing outward, when another explosion caught the transport's right front corner, bouncing the vehicle a meter into the air and leaving a section of armor plating black and twisted.

"This is impossible!" Gehad shouted. "How do they do this?"

"Ask questions later!" Ashel growled, pointing toward the Spaarti plant. "Look! Here is our air support."

And impressive air support it was, too, Tories had to admit. A hundred STAPs had appeared in the sky, sweeping in from both east and west as they converged on the Binalie estate.

But the STAPs were still out of range, the droids in their cordon had their weapons and sensors aimed outward as they searched for their unseen attackers, and the Neimoidians were far too preoccupied with their own safety to be watching their prisoners. Time to go to work.

"Now," Ashel said, ungluing himself from the partial protection of the doorway and sprinting between the rows of droids toward the transport. Grabbing Corf's arm, Gehad started to follow, tugging the boy along behind him. They didn't get far. Reaching forward, Tories caught the boy's other arm and planted his feet solidly into the ground just outside the mansion's doorway.

For a moment, Corf was stretched between them like a pull-war cable, and then Gehad stopped and spun around. "What do you-?" he snarled.

He never finished his question. In that same brief second, the two combat droids that had been marching along a meter behind them, caught offguard by Tories' sudden halt, arrived at either side of the Jedi. And in a single smooth motion, Tories reached beneath his robe, pulled out his lightsaber, and ignited it. Gehad gave a little deep-throated scream, letting go of Corf's arm as if he'd been burned and scuttling away from him.

Tories gave the boy a quick shove back through the doorway as he slashed the lightsaber across the upper chest of the droid to his left. The brilliant green blade sliced through the thick acertron armor like it was wrapping plastoid, and the top third of the droid slid off and fell with a crash onto the ground. The rest of the machine, caught in a trick of balance, remained standing stolidly upright like a beheaded corpse patiently awaiting further orders.

Tories didn't wait to see whether or not it would fall. The assault droid to his right was already reacting to this unexpected threat, twisting at its hips to try

to bring its blasters to bear. Tories swiveled to his right to meet it, swinging his lightsaber around and down across the raised forearms above the mounted blasters and dropping them onto the ground. His second cut took off the droid's legs; even before the pieces clattered to the ground, he leaped backward through the doorway into the mansion.

"Go!" he ordered the Neimoidians, lifting his lightsaber into guard position. As if in emphasis, another nearby explosion blew clouds of dirt into the air. The two aliens didn't need further encouragement. Turning, they sprinted down the line of droids and scampered into the transport. The surviving droids followed, closing up the cordon neatly behind them.

A minute later the transport, joined now by three more of the vehicles, was heading east at high speed.

"Wow," Corf breathed.

Tories turned to see the boy gazing up at him, a stunned expression on his face. "You all right?" he asked.

Mechanically, Corf nodded. "I never saw anything like that," he said. "Just doing what I was trained for," Tories said. With one last look outside, he closed down his lightsaber. "Let's go tell your father you're all right," he said. "And after that," he added grimly, "you may both want to go to your safe room. This could get nasty."

There they go," Roshton commented as the last of the droids piled into the transports. The first vehicle, the one with the Neimoidians aboard, had already left the ground and was clawing for distance, the STAP escort forming up around it. "They won't be trying that again for awhile."

"Probably not," Doriana agreed, his eyes still on the remains of the D-60s that had taken Tories maybe half a second to turn to scrap. He'd been around Jedi much of his life, but never before had he actually witnessed one in full combat mode.

And for the first time he began to truly see why Sidious wanted them eliminated.

"Estate units, secure," Roshton was saying into his comlink. "City, forest units: stand ready."

With an effort, Doriana pulled his attention back to the military situation. "What do you mean, stand ready?" he asked. "And how did you manage those shots?"

"Don't be dense," Roshton chided. "That was nothing but a set of strategically placed, remote-controlled land mines. You must not have noticed all the landscaping being done around the grounds the past two days."

"I had other things on my mind," Doriana said tartly, watching the fleeing transports. Instead of taking the straightest route back to Spaarti Creations, they were swinging far to the east. What in?...

And then, he got it. "They're avoiding the south lawn," he said. "They don't want to risk anything else crashing on it and irritating the Cranscoc."

"Exactly what I thought they'd do," Roshton said with grim satisfaction. "Forest unit: secure. City unit: fire at will."

Abruptly, a dozen blaster bolts sizzled up from the northern edge of Foulahn City, blowing apart STAPs and peeling chunks of armor from the transports.

"What are you doing?" Doriana demanded. "You've chased them away. Isn't that enough?"

"No," Roshton said. "City unit: take them down."

The STAPs were returning fire now, and that whole section of sky seemed to be filled with multicolored blaster fire. Doriana found himself holding his breath as he watched the transports dodging and staggering, trying desperately to reach the safety of the plant. If Roshton's zealousness got the Neimoidians killed - or worse, if it panicked them into pulling their droids out of the factory for a counterattack...

And then, something else in the sky caught his eye. Just a pair of specks, but as he watched they grew visibly larger. "Roshton!" he snapped, fumbling out a compact set of electrobinoculars and switching them on. "We've got company."

"Let me see," Roshton ordered, reaching for the instrument.

Doriana twitched it away, pressing his eyes against the lenses.

A single glance was enough. "It's a pair of C-9979 landing ships," he told Roshton, handing over the electrobinoculars. "Looks like all your little stunt accomplished was to persuade the Separatists to bring in reinforcements. "

The Neimoidian commander's careless choice of a landing spot two days earlier had enabled Roshton's clone troopers to slow down their troop deployment long enough for the Republic forces to evacuate the Spaarti Creations complex. With this second wave, the Separatists made no such error. The landing ships put down to the west and northeast of the city, in open territory where no close-in attack would be possible, and immediately began deploying their troops and vehicles.

Roshton had barely enough time to order his men to pull back before the MTT transports and AAT battle tanks made their orderly way through the streets of Foulahn City, along the serviceways of Triv Spaceport, and even into the mostly uninhabited wooded hills west and north of the Spaarti complex. The AATs took up position at official buildings and strategic road intersections, while the MTTs quickly found places to dump their deadly cargos of battle droids, super battle droids, assault droids, and droidekas. By late afternoon, every square meter for fifteen kilometers around Spaarti Creations was in Separatist hands. With one small exception.

"One of the C-9979S is here," Roshton said, tapping a spot on the holomap due west of Foulahn City. "Its droids and AATs are occupying western Foulahn, plus all the territory west and north of the Spaarti complex. The other one's here-" he indicated a point near the Quatreen River where it meandered its way between the city and the Triv Spaceport to the northeast of it"-where they can cover the eastern city and the spaceport. I hear some units have gone a ways up the Quatreen and into Navroc City, too, but I don't have independent confirmation of that."

Tories looked over at Binalie. The other's face looked pale, but that could have just been the lighting. With only limited power supplies available here in the depths of the Binalie family safe room-and with no desire to attract notice from the droids occupying the main house upstairs-Binalie had elected to shut

down everything except the permlights. "So where does that leave us?" Tories asked.

"Basically, stuck in here," Roshton said heavily. "My troops are doing what they can to harass the droids, but we don't have nearly enough manpower to push them back to the landing ships. Master Doriana tells me Supreme Chancellor Palpatine has promised help, but that could be as much as several days away.

"And meanwhile, your clones and the droids tear Foulahn City to shreds," Binalie growled.

"We're keeping the war out of your plant, aren't we?" Roshton retorted. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"What I wanted was for the whole cursed war to stay off my world," Binalie shot back.

"I'm afraid those choices aren't always ours to make," Doriana spoke up calmly.

"It certainly wasn't Commander Roshton's idea to bring the war here."

"So we just sit here and let them wreck our city?"

"If I were you, I'd focus on the central issue," Roshton said tartly. "Namely, once the sun sets they'll be able to get the Cranscoc to retool the plant. Once that happens, you can wave goodbye to any hope for your city or your world."

"What do you mean?" Corf asked, huddling a little closer to his father.

"The Separatists are about to launch a brand-new line of assault droids," Roshton told him. "Once they get it up and running, every hour they spend in there means a stronger droid army on Cartao. If they're not stopped, sooner or later they'll have enough troops to defeat anything the Republic can spare to throw against them."

He looked back at Binalie. "And at that point, the only way to stop them. .."

"No," Binalie said flatly. "Don't even think it."

"You think I want Spaarti destroyed?" Roshton asked, his voice icy calm. "Those new cloning tanks we were building could conceivably turn the war around in a matter of months, and this is the only place we can fine-tune the production quickly enough to get the most efficient design possible. But at the same time, we can't let this new D-90 assault droid line get started, either. I'm sorry, but we're running low on options."

"Just a moment," Doriana said, straightening up and pulling a holoprojector from a belt pouch. "We may have news."

He flicked it on, and an image of an Iktotchi head appeared over the projection platform, its distinctively shaped horns curving down toward its shoulders. The words were too faint for Tories to hear, but suddenly Doriana smiled. "Thank you, General," he said, standing up and walking over to Roshton. "Commander, General FyefeeTiis of the Republic Light Cruiser Whipsaw would like a word with you."

He took the chair beside Roshton, holding up the holoprojector so that both of them could see and hear. Without waiting for an invitation, Tories moved over to the seat on Roshton's other side. Doriana flashed him a look, but said nothing.

"...with ten fully loaded LAAT/i gunships at your disposal," General Tiis was saying as Tories sat down.

"That's only four hundred troops," Roshton pointed out doubtfully. "Not going to do much good against three C-9979s' worth of droids and AATs unless you can knock out their control ship."

"Thank you for the suggestion," Tiis said dryly. "We had in mind to do just that. The gunships will be dropped in five minutes; ETA your position in thirty. We'll commence our own attack on the control ship in fifteen." The image vanished. "How's that going to work with the Cranscoc timing?" Doriana asked.

Binalie shrugged as he consulted his chrono. "Sunset's in about ten minutes. By the time the gunships arrive, it'll be nearly full dark."

"So we have a chance of getting the Separatists out before they can retool," Doriana concluded. "Excellent. What's the plan from this end, Commander?"

"Basically, to engage the enemy," Roshton said, pulling out his comlink.

"Between the incoming gunships and my own clone troopers, we should be able to cause a fair amount of chaos out there. With luck, that may distract the Neimoidians long enough for us to get in through the tunnel and retake the plant."

"You can't do that," Binalie objected.

"We'll be as careful as we can," Roshton said.

"That's not what I meant," Binalie said. "That Neimoidian commander-Ashel-said they'd sealed their end of the tunnel."

"Sealed it so well that a Jedi with a lightsaber can't get in?" Roshton shook his head. "I doubt that very much."

"You'll still be risking damage to Spaarti," Doriana pointed out. "Why not wait until the control ship has been destroyed? The Neimoidians certainly won't put up a fight once their army's out of commission."

"Two reasons," Roshton said. "One, because I wouldn't put it past Separatists to start wrecking things as soon as they know they've lost. And two-" he grimaced. "I should be out there with my men, not skulking around down here. The sooner I can get into action, the better."

"That's a pretty poor basis for tactical decisions," Doriana warned. "And Lord Binalie is right: we don't want any fighting inside the plant."

"Tell that to the Neimoidians," Roshton said shortly. "As of nineteen minutes from now, that'll be their decision, not mine."

"Just a minute," Tories said slowly as Roshton lifted his comlink, bits and pieces of an idea starting to swirl around in his mind. A strange, dangerous idea, but one that might work for all that. "What if we could get all the droids to come outside to fight?"

"And how do you persuade them to do that?" Binalie growled. "Neimoidians are cowards-they wouldn't just send their guards marching away. Especially not with a possible tunnel attack to guard against."

"Unless they thought the tunnel was secure," Tories pointed out. "And thought the factory perimeter wasn't." Binalie blinked. "You've lost me."

"Of course," Roshton said, sitting up straighter. "Like I said, they know a Jedi can probably break through the tunnel. They also know, from bitter experience, what it's like to face one in battle."

"So what are you suggesting?" Doriana asked, frowning. "That we put Master Tories outside with your clone troopers?"

"Exactly," Roshton said. "Leading a charge against, say, the plant's east door. They'd have no choice but to throw everything they have at us." Doriana snorted gently. "Sounds suicidal."

"Not for a Jedi," Binalie said, his voice and sense suddenly tense with cautious hope as he saw a chance of getting his factory back intact. "You could do it, Master Tories. I know you could."

"Please?" Corf added, gazing pleadingly at Tories. "Just a moment," Doriana put in. "I'm not at all sure I can authorize an action like this. An attack of any sort will put the plant at serious risk."

"It's that, or the plant stays in Separatist hands," Roshton pointed out.

"Who's side are you on here, anyway?"

"Don't be insulting," Doriana said coldly. "You want to keep the enemy busy while the Whipsaw tries to take out the control ship, go right ahead. But keep away from Spaarti."

"Trust us, Master Doriana," Roshton said. "Or rather, trust in the Jedi." Doriana grimaced. "Well, when you put it that way... all right." Roshton looked at Tories. "Master Tories?"

"Let's see first if I can get through the droids upstairs," Tories said, getting to his feet.

"Let's see if we can get through them," Roshton corrected, standing up to join him. "Like I said, I need to be with my men."

"You're both insane," Doriana declared. "But if everyone else is going, I might as well, too."

Roshton shook his head. "Sorry. No offense, but I don't want any bureaucrats getting in the way."

"None taken," Doriana assured him. "But as the Supreme Chancellor's representative here, I not only have the right to come with you, but I'm more or less required to do so." Roshton grimaced. "Fine-have it your own way. Then if we're ready...?" Corf took a breath - "No," Tories said firmly before the boy could speak. "You and your father are staying right here."

"But..."

"Corf," Binalie said warningly.

The boy subsided. "Right," Roshton said, clicking on his comlink. "Let's get this off the launch pad."

Doriana never did learn how many droids the Neimoidians had left inside the Binalie mansion. All he knew was that there were eight of them between the three humans and the outside door. Tories dealt with all eight swiftly, efficiently, and amazingly quietly.

There were a few others on patrol outside, strutting around in the gathering dusk as if they owned the place. The Jedi dealt with those, too.

It was over five kilometers to the staging area Roshton and his lieutenant had settled on during their brief comlink communication. Fortunately, two of the clone troopers had managed to sneak a small landspeeder through the droid patrols and were waiting for them at the eastern edge of the Binalie estate. A short ride, with frequent zigzags and occasional pauses under cover, and they were there.

The clone trooper lieutenant was waiting when the landspeeder pulled up, standing quietly in the concealment of a group of trees perhaps a kilometer from the blank walls of the Spaarti plant. "Welcome, Commander," he greeted Roshton as the newcomers stepped up to him. "Glad you could make it."

"So am I," Roshton said. "Situation?"

"I've pulled together two hundred troops," the lieutenant said, gesturing around him. Doriana looked around, but wherever the troops were hiding, they were doing a good job of it. "The rest are still in the city, dodging the droids' house-to-house search," the lieutenant continued. "At last report the gunships were still approaching from the south; they should reach missile range in approximately five minutes, and laser-cannon range two minutes after that. Their first salvo will be our troops' signal to attack."

"What about the control ship?" Roshton asked.

The lieutenant nodded his helmet slightly upwards. "That attack seems to have already begun."

Doriana looked up. It was difficult to tell through the light clouds drifting across the sky, but he thought he could see faint flickers of laser fire. "Any idea how it's going?" he asked.

"General Tiis hasn't taken the time to keep us up to date," the lieutenant said, a bit dryly.

"That's all right," Roshton said. "If and when he destroys it, it should be easy to figure out. What's the local enemy status?"

"The Number Two C-9979 is approximately three kilometers to our south," the lieutenant said. "Most of their troops have been deployed to the spaceport and eastern Foulahn City, but there are at least three AATs and probably two hundred battle droids standing by on guard duty."

"Three kilometers," Doriana said, peering off that direction at the deceptively cheery city lights in the distance. "Isn't that a little close?"

"It's extremely close," Roshton agreed. "And deliberately so. If you'd ever fought the Neimoidians before, you'd know they dearly love overwhelming odds. I'm betting that the chance to catch our group in a crossfire will be too tempting for them to pass up."

He turned to Tories. "Any last thoughts or suggestions, Master Tories?" For a moment, Tories gazed out toward the wall of the plant, now little more than a

vague shape against the darkening sky. Doriana gazed in turn at the outline of Tories' profile, watching the glint of his white hair in the dim light, wondering what kind of thoughts were going through that Jedi-trained mind.

How did Jedi think, he wondered suddenly. He knew something of how they acted and reacted, and as the man who often delivered Palpatine's messages to the Jedi Council, he had long since learned how to use their concerns and priorities to persuade them to do what he wanted.

But how exactly did they think! Was it basically the same as normal people? Or was there something about their training that left them more alien than any of the species making up the Republic?

In the distance to the south came the faint sound of multiple explosions. As it was joined by the stutter of blaster fire, Tories seemed to straighten fully up. "Nothing comes to mind, Commander," he said, sliding his lightsaber from beneath his robes. "Let's do it."

He set off toward Spaarti Creations, walking with a swift, firm pace. Three steps into the trip, he ignited his lightsaber, the green blade blazing upward like a beacon as he strode off into the darkness. "Well, don't just stand there, Lieutenant," Roshton said.

"Yes, sir," the other said, sounding a bit startled by the Jedi's bold move. "All troops: advance."

Doriana felt his breath catch in his throat. Suddenly, the area around them was swarming with clone troopers, emerging from shadows or piles of leaves or from beneath camouflage ground covers. They set off behind Tories, forming into neat ranks as they went.

Roshton was saying something. "I'm sorry?" Doriana said, tearing his eyes away from the silent soldiers.

"I asked if the Supreme Chancellor's representative would care to join us," the commander repeated as he slipped on a clone trooper headset.

"Thank you, but I think I'll stay here," Doriana said, getting his mind back to business. "I've already seen your men in action, but I haven't had a chance to observe General Tiis's troops."

He couldn't see Roshton's expression in the darkness, but there was no mistaking the cynical edge in his voice. "Of course," the commander said.

"Shall I leave you a guard?"

"That won't be necessary," Doriana said. "But I'd like to borrow your other comlink, if I may, so I can keep up with what's happening."

"Sure," Roshton grunted, pulling out his belt comlink. "Over there behind that thick tree would probably be a good place to observe from." Doriana smiled to himself. It amazed him sometimes how easily people seemed to think they could offend him. "Thank you, Commander," he said calmly. "I'll expect a full report when you return."

They'd made it perhaps halfway to Spaarti Creations when the first response came from the picket line around the plant. Blaster bolts began to sizzle across the distance as the droids opened fire, passing harmlessly between the marching soldiers or bouncing almost as harmlessly off their armor. Tories peered ahead into the gloom as his lightsaber deflected away the bolts that came his direction, using the light of the enemy's own fire to see how they were configuring their battle line. The droids directly between them and the plant's east door were standing fast, while more droids were hurrying from north and south of that position to join them.

"Looks like this whole section of the picket line is pulling in to face us," Roshton murmured from beside him.

"Yes," Tories agreed, looking back over his shoulder. All he could see back there were the lights of the city and spaceport. "Any sign of that crossfire yet?"

"Two AATs and about fifty droids have just headed northeast," Roshton said. "We should see them soon. Ah."

Tories turned back. The plant's east door had opened, revealing a new set of droids hurrying through to join the picket line. "Here come the reinforcements," Roshton said. "I'd guess we'll be seeing those AATs very soon."

And with that, Tories knew, it was time to go. "How long can you hold out against them?" he asked, deflecting one last bolt and then closing down his lightsaber.

Roshton threw him a sideways look, wrapping his free hand around his headset's voice pickup. "What do you have in mind?"

"We're assuming they've largely emptied the plant of combat droids," Tories told him. "If I can get inside, I should be able to get the drop on the Neimoidians. If they're as cowardly as you say, maybe I can persuade them to surrender even if Tiis isn't able to take out the command ship."

"How do you expect to get in?" Roshton asked. "They'll have picket lines at all the doors."

"Leave that to me," Tories said, nodding to the left. "But I have to go before they close off that gap. So again: how long can you hold out?"

"As long as necessary," Roshton said, glancing around as he released his grip on his voice pickup. "Lieutenant: looks like there's a small hollow ahead and to the right. We'll deploy in defensive formation there." He looked at Tories again. "Good luck."

Tories nodded and turned to the left, taking a moment to get his bearings. Then, stretching out to the Force, he dropped into a crouch and ran.

Jedi were capable of incredible bursts of speed when necessary, at least over short distances. Tories used every bit of that capability, his legs pumping in a blur against the ground as he slipped around the end of the picket line now beginning to close into a semicircle around the beleaguered clone troopers. A pair of droid stragglers suddenly loomed in front of him in the darkness and then collapsed into broken rubble as he used the Force to shove them backward. By the time the burst of energy and speed faded and he trotted to a halt, he was standing at the southeast corner of the plant, just clear of the forbidden south lawn, facing a sheer, three-story-high wall.

He gazed up at the dark slab rising above him. Three stories was an impossible jump, at least for him. But halfway up the wall, a distance he could reach, was a line of louvered air vents, each about ten centimeters across.

He could only hope Lord Binalie's father had built the vents and louvers with the same ruggedness with which he'd built everything else in Spaarti Creations. Getting a good grip on his lightsaber, making sure his hand was safely away from the activation stud, he bent his knees, stretched out to the Force, and jumped.

He was near the top of his arc when he spotted the nearest vent, dimly lit by the flashes of laser and blaster fire coming from Roshton's position. With a quick flick of his mind, he reached out to the louvers, angling them up into a horizontal position.

And as his upward momentum slowed to a halt, he slipped his lightsaber hilt between two of the louvers.

The metal creaked in protest as his full weight came onto the hilt, but to his relief the louvers held. Stretching out to the Force, he pulled down hard against the wedged lightsaber, hurling himself upward again.

He made it with three centimeters to spare, catching the edge of the roof with his outstretched fingertips and heaving himself the rest of the way up to sprawl onto his belly on the cold permacrete. Swiveling around, he leaned partway over the edge, extricating his lightsaber hilt from the louvers and calling it back to his hand.

The blaster fire in the east seemed to be intensifying as he slipped silently across the roof toward the nearest skylight. He reached it, rubbed off some of the collected grit with his sleeve, and peered inside.

The factory floor below was deserted. He stretched out to the Force, trying to track down the agitated alien minds he could sense beneath him. Further to the west, perhaps? Yes, he decided: somewhere a little ways west of his position. He frowned, trying to visualize the layout of the plant... Of course. Cowardly or merely very cautious, the Neimoidians would have set up shop in Production Area Four, where they could keep an eye on the tunnel leading to the Binalie estate.

He set off that direction, keeping a wary eye overhead for wandering STAR patrols. But all the ones he could see were a good distance away, either swooping behind him to the east near Roshton's position, or else doing tight circles around the C-9979 landing ship over near the plant's west door. The

cacophony from Roshton's position was definitely growing louder, possibly the droids from the landing ship now close enough to add their strength to the attack. A new sound shrieked through the air, and he turned in time to see a Republic gunship dive toward the ground, sweeping the droid positions with rapid-fire laser fire. It swung upward again, and was cutting around for another pass when it exploded in a brilliant red-and-yellow fireball. And then he was at the skylight over the Area Four control station. Again cleaning off a section of the transparisteel, he looked down.

There they were, directly below him on the control platform: the two Neimoidians who had earlier invaded Lord Binalie's office, plus a few more in much drabber clothing, all gathered together around a plotting display that had been set up in front of the Cranscoc twillers. The Master Creator, Gehad, was jabbing at something on the display, apparently arguing with Commander Ashel about it. Milling alertly around the control platform were a half dozen battle droids, their attention and blasters turned outward. The skylight's fastening catch was at the inside base directly across from Tories. Reaching out with the Force, he undid it and swung the skylight open on its hinges. Taking a deep breath, he dropped through the opening.

He landed on the platform directly behind Commander Ashel, his knees bending to absorb the impact. Ashel had time to twitch, and someone else had time to give a startled squeak, before Tories was upright again with his arm firmly around Ashel's chest and the business end of his lightsaber pressed just as firmly against the side of the Neimoidian's head. "Everyone stay still," he warned. But the droids' reflexes were apparently set on hair-trigger. Before Tories could say more, or Ashel could say anything at all, they whirled toward the platform, their blasters spitting fire toward him. Tories took a long step away from Ashel and the others, igniting his lightsaber and whipping it against the incoming blaster bolts. Two seconds later, all six droids lay shattered and smoking, destroyed by their own backscattered fire. Before the stunned Neimoidians could react, Tories took another long step back and regained his grip on Ashel's robes. "Let's try that again," he said mildly. "Everyone stay still."

"What do you want?" Ashel asked, his voice shaking.

"I want this to be over," Tories told him. He glanced at the Cranscoc twillers crouching down in front of the control system mud flow, wondering how they were taking all this.

But if they were worried, surprised, or even fully aware of what was going on, he couldn't see it. "Contact the command ship and order them to surrender."

"Impossible." Ashel made a cautious gesture toward the ruined droids. "We cannot communicate except through the droids, and you have destroyed them all. "

"Really," Tories said. It was almost certainly a lie, but there was an easy way to call the other's bluff. "Fine. Come on."

"Where do we go?" Gehad asked timorously.

"It just so happens I know where there are other droids you can use," Tories told him. "And watch it. I doubt you want the kind of trouble I can make for you."

Keeping a grip on Ashel's robe, he led the way down the platform steps. The Neimoidians' sealing of the tunnel exit had been achieved by the simple procedure of welding the leading edge of the ramp solidly to the floor, and it took him only a couple of seconds to cut through the weld with his lightsaber. Ashel quivered in his grip as he did so, but said nothing.

Their footsteps echoed eerily as they headed east through the empty plant. Tories kept alert for a surprise attack, but apparently the Neimoidians really had sent all the rest of the droids outside.

The battle was still going on as they reached the east door and stepped out into the night air. "There are your droids," Tories said, giving Ashel an imperative push toward the light and noise. "Let's go talk to them."

"You cannot be serious," the Neimoidian protested, cringing back against Tories' grip. "We are not equipped for battle."

"Too bad," Tories said. "But if that's the only way to stop them..."

He broke off as, abruptly, the circle of blasters around Roshton's position fell silent. Something in the sky to the left caught his eye, and he looked over as a pair of STAPs plummeted to the ground.

He craned his head to look up into the night sky. There, almost directly above him, was the fading light of an expanding gas cloud.

General Tiis and the Whipsaw had come through.

"I guess we won't need to talk to the droids, after all," he commented. He could see movement from Roshton's position now as the clone troopers abandoned their positions, running toward him and the plant now wide open behind him.

"Come on," he added, returning his lightsaber to his belt and nudging the Neimoidians toward the approaching troops.

The two groups met halfway. "I see you've been busy," Roshton greeted Tories as he trotted to a halt, gesturing his troops to continue on toward the plant.

"What's it like inside?"

"Empty, as far as I could tell," Tories told him. "The tunnel's been unsealed, too, if you want to get the techs back in."

"Excellent," Roshton said in grim satisfaction. "We'll get the Cranscoc to undo any retooling they did, then get back to work."

"I doubt the Neimoidians got very far with their retooling," Tories said.

"Speaking of which, what should I do with them?"

Roshton glanced past him toward the plant. "Would you mind taking them to Commander Bratt? He's in one of the gunships heading over to shut down the Number Two C-9979."

"No problem," Tories said. "I'll see you later."

Roshton nodded and hurried off after his men. Tories started his own party off in the opposite direction. "It is not yet over," Ashel warned as they walked.

"We have not yet been defeated."

"You just keep thinking that," Tories said. They'd reached the site of Roshton's stand now, and he paused for a moment, gazing across the battlefield. The ground was almost literally covered with the wreckage of droids, with the bodies of probably a dozen clone troopers lying among the debris, their armor no longer white. Fires were still burning in the remains of a couple of vehicles, one of them the gunship Tories had seen being destroyed. Standing amid the general carnage were probably a hundred more droids, still upright yet with an oddly sagging look about them, where the loss of their control ship had left them.

He was still gazing at them when, with a sort of collective twitch, they came back to life.

For perhaps half a second the sheer unexpectedness of it froze him to the spot. But for the Neimoidians, that half-second was all the time they needed. At a barked word from Ashel, the Neimoidians dropped flat on the ground.

And Tories found himself standing alone in the middle of a ring of blasters. There was no time for anything fancy, and literally nowhere to go but up. He leaped up and sideways, igniting his lightsaber and slashing behind him as he arced over the revived droid army, trusting in the Force to guide his hand and deflect the shots. He hit the ground running and dodging, heading away from the plant toward the city, a hail of blaster bolts nipping at his robes.

"Yes, run, Jedi," Ashel's mocking voice wafted after him, more painful even than the blaster bolt near-misses. "Tell us again of this trouble you can make for us."

Tories didn't answer. Ahead, he could hear the sounds of renewed blaster fire coming from Foulahn City, and from the sense of startled anguish rolling over his mind it was clear that the rest of the Republic forces had been taken as much by surprise as he had. Unless he could get to them in time, to lend his strength to theirs, the battle would be lost.

He couldn't.

And it was.

"I guess the Separatists have finally learned from their past mistakes," Doriana commented as he, Tories, and Binalie stood on one of the mansion's north-

facing balconies. "They must have found a way to make a control matrix compact enough that they could bring a backup down to the planet surface. My guess is that it's probably in one of the landing ships. Not that it really matters."

"And not that we'll ever know for sure," Binalie said bitterly, shivering in the cold night air. "They're all dead, then?"

"Dead, or scattered," Tories said quietly, and Doriana could hear the pain and self-reproach in the Jedi's voice. "Except for the ones Roshton took into Spaarti with him." Binalie sighed. "And they're as good as dead, aren't they?"

"I can't see it any other way," Doriana agreed, gazing out toward Spaarti Creations. Above the plant, a hundred STAPs were circling through the night sky like carrion-eaters, glinting with the light from a dozen distant fires. On the grounds around the plant, invisible from where the three men stood, a thousand combat droids and a dozen battle tanks stood their own silent watch.

And between the Binalie mansion and the plant, acrid smoke still rose from the crater where the Separatist hailfire droid had emptied both of its missile pods into the ground, collapsing the tunnel and cutting off the clone troopers' last avenue of escape. The Separatists had been nothing if not thorough. "The only reason they're still alive is that the Separatists don't want to wreck the plant trying to force them out," he added.

"But then, they don't have to, do they?" Tories said quietly. "By the time General Tiis can return with enough ground troops, they'll likely have starved in there."

"Yes," Binalie said. "Irony, isn't it? Commander Roshton spent all that effort to retake the plant. And he succeeded.

"And that's where he's going to die."

The streets of Foulahn City were dark and deserted as Kinman Doriana picked his way through the litter of broken droids, small missile craters, shattered buildings, bodies, and the general clutter of war. The military comlink he'd borrowed from Commander Roshton had allowed him to listen in on the

Republic side of the battle, and he'd known the fighting here and at the Triv Spaceport had been fierce. But even that knowledge hadn't prepared him for the actual carnage the soldiers had left behind.

A half dozen craters overlapped each other across the street in front of him, half filled with rubble from the buildings the missiles had destroyed and a few mutilated bodies of the civilians who'd been caught in the crossfire. The fighting here must have been particularly bad, he decided, with a higher-ranking officer directing the Republic side of the attack. Maybe here he'd finally find what he was looking for.

He hoped so. It was well after midnight, he was aching tired, and the new Separatist masters of this part of Cartao undoubtedly had a curfew in place for the citizenry. The first patrol that spotted him would be trouble, and he wasn't in the mood for arguing with combat droids. Despite the dramatic events and reversals of the past few hours, things were still adhering reasonably closely to Lord Sidious's plan, but that didn't mean Dorianana himself had to enjoy the situation. He'd had his fill of battles a long time ago, and very much preferred to stay at his desk in Supreme Chancellor Palpatine's office and handle his schemes and manipulations long-distance.

A glimmer of white to the left caught his eye, and he picked his way carefully toward it through the shattered road material. Probably just another piece of the deco-rative white roof trim Foulahn's residents were so fond of, he thought sourly, but it still had to be checked out.

But it wasn't a piece of roof trim. It was the half buried body of a clone trooper. A lieutenant, from the markings on his armor.

Finally.

Under normal circumstances, it would have been the work of perhaps two minutes to dig the body out of the rubble. With the need for absolute silence, it took Dorianana closer to ten. But it was worth the effort. Hidden away in the back of one of the survival pouches on the lieutenant's utility belt was an unlabeled datacard. Slipping it into his pocket, Dorianana resealed the survival pouch and started to straighten up.

"Halt," a flat mechanical voice ordered from behind him. Doriana froze in mid-crouch. "Don't shoot," he called, stretching his hands slowly to the sides so that the droids could see they were empty. "I'm an official medical observer."

"Turn and identify," the voice ordered.

Doriana obeyed, turning carefully on the uncertain footing. It was a complete patrol, all right: six of the old-style battle droids, one of them standing slightly in the lead. In the dim light, Doriana couldn't tell whether there was anyone of command rank among them. "Identify," the droid in the lead repeated.

"My name is Kinman Drifkin," he told them. "I'm a member of the Aargau Medical Observer Corps. We're a neutral power sworn to observe and report on any atrocities taking place during this conflict."

The droid seemed to digest that. "Come forward," he ordered. "Do you have official identification?"

"Of course," Doriana said, slipping his hand into his ID pocket as he walked toward the group. The droids lifted their blasters warningly as he withdrew his hand, relaxed slightly as they saw he held only a datacard. "Which of you has a reader?" he asked.

"I will take it," the spokesman said, shifting his grip on his blaster and extending a claw-like hand.

Doriana stepped to him and handed him the datacard. So this one was definitely the leader; and at this distance, he could see now the pale yellow markings of a command officer on its head and torso. Excellent. "I believe you'll find my credentials are in order," he added, glancing casually around. There was no one else in sight, human or droid.

"We will see," the officer droid said, taking the datacard and sliding it into a reader slot set into the lower part of its jaw line. "It says here that your assigned observation area is..."

"Barauch seven-nine-seven," Doriana said in a low voice. "Filliae gron one-one-three."

The officer broke off in midsentence. Doriana eased a few centimeters to his right, watching to see if the droids and their weapons would track his movement.

They didn't. To all appearances, the entire squad was frozen and oblivious. "I'll be crocked," Doriana murmured to himself, feeling muscles relax that he hadn't noticed were tense. So, the magic backdoor lockout code that Sidious had given to him actually worked.

And if the lockout code worked... "Pinkrun four-seven-two aprion one-eight-one-one," he said, reaching out to the spokesman's jaw and retrieving his false ID. "Backskip three minutes; pause one minute; restart. Execute."

The patrol gave a group shiver. "Accessed," the spokesman said, his mechanical voice sounding somehow even flatter than it had before.

Smiling tightly, Doriana sidled past them, heading back the direction they'd come from as quickly as he could manage without twisting his ankle on the loose stone. He had just one minute to disappear before the droids came out of their freeze and restarted their patrol, with this little incident conveniently erased from their group memory. He reached the nearest corner and ducked around it, pausing there to listen. A few seconds later he heard the distinctive clunk as the droids came to life again. With more clattering, they continued on their patrol, their footsteps fading off into the night breezes. Smiling again, Doriana detached himself from the wall and headed back toward the Binalie estate.

"You all right?" a voice asked softly from the shadows. Doriana jumped violently. "Who's there?" he hissed.

"Relax," Jafer Tories calmed him, stepping into view from a doorway, his lightsaber ready in his hand. "It's just me."

Doriana took a deep breath. "You nearly stopped my heart there," he said reproachfully. "In the future, kindly practice your Jedi skulking techniques on someone else."

"Sorry," Tories said with a faint smile. "But for a moment there I thought I was going to have to demonstrate more than just skulking. What happened over there?"

"What do you mean, what happened?" Doriana hedged, wondering uneasily just how much the Jedi had seen. "It was just a standard security patrol."

"Who looked at your ID and then let you go," Tories said pointedly. "Since when do the Separatists give free passes to Palpatine's advisors?"

Doriana started breathing a little easier. So, the Jedi had been close enough to see the confrontation, but not to hear what was said. Good enough. "No free passes for advisors, no," he told Tories, digging out his false ID again. "But plenty for neutral observers. Kinman Drifkin, Aargau Medical Observer Corps, at your service."

"Cute," Tories said. He took the ID, peered at it, and handed it back. "Holds up to baseline scrutiny, does it?"

"As you saw," Doriana reminded him, putting the datacard away again. "Supreme Chancellor Palpatine can hardly afford to let his people get picked up by the enemy in the middle of a war zone. Speaking of which, what are you doing out here, anyway?"

"Funny; I was going to ask you the same question," Tories said, his voice suddenly going a little odd. "Lord Binalie said you'd gone into the city and asked me to see if you might be in trouble. So what are you doing?"

"Feeling mildly pleased with myself, and ready to get out of here," Doriana told him. "Has Lord Binalie found a place to settle in yet?"

"We've got one, yes," Tories said.

"Good," Doriana said. "Take me there, and we'll all sort it out together. "

For just the briefest moment Tories continued to gaze at him in that discomfiting way Jedi all over the galaxy seemed to have learned to perfection. Then, reluctantly, Doriana thought, he nodded. "All right. Follow me."

He headed off down the deserted streets. Doriana followed, scowling to himself. It was Tories' fault, after all, that the situation had ended up the way it had, with Roshton and his clone troopers holding the plant while the Separatist droid armies waited uselessly outside. It wasn't at all the way Darth Sidious

had planned this operation, and he winced as the thought of what the Sith lord would say about it the next time Doriana contacted him.

Still, the situation was far from lost. Republic reinforcements were undoubtedly days away, which gave Doriana time to put things back on track.

And as for the Jedi...

He gazed at Tories' broad back as the other picked his way around yet another missile crater. Now that he thought about it, Tories' unabashed heroics tonight might actually work to Doriana's advantage. Certainly the other had risen to new heights of respect and prestige in the handful of days since Doriana had landed on Cartao.

Which would make it that much more of a pleasure to bring the Jedi down.

With the tunnel under the Spaarti Creations' south lawn collapsed and impassible, there was no longer any reason for the Neimoidians controlling the Separatist forces to occupy the Binalie estate. They had occupied it anyway, probably out of spite for the way Tories had helped chase them out of the mansion not too many hours earlier. With his home occupied by battle droids, it had become necessary for Lord Binalie and his son Corf to find other accommodations.

The estate's greenhouse had been probably the least likely possibility, given the near-complete visibility through the building's long transparisteel panels. Which was precisely why Tories had suggested it. What any searchers would assume—at least, what Tories hoped they would assume—was that there was no chance of anyone hiding in such an open place and move on to more likely prospects.

What any such searchers would have forgotten was the profusion of plants inside the greenhouse, plants that could be shifted and adjusted and layered to form hidden areas as sheltered and invisible as a military camp in deep forest.

Binalie and Corf had nearly finished setting up their new quarters when Tories and Doriana arrived. "Ah; Master Tories," Binalie said, setting a package of emergency food rations beside three more against a line of tall plants with wide overhanging fronds. "Did you find Doriana? Oh—there you are," he added as he caught sight of Doriana in the dim starlight. "Any trouble?"

"None," Tories said. "I found him bluffing his way past a droid patrol."

"Really," Binalie said. His voice was casual, but Tories could sense the sudden suspicion in his sense. "And how exactly do you bluff battle droids?"

"With the judicious use of false credentials," Doriana told him briefly. "But never mind that. I have something to show you that should be considerably more interesting. Is there a place where we can have a little more light?"

"I suppose," Binalie said reluctantly. "Master Tories-?"

"Why don't you go ahead and take him downstairs," Tories suggested. "I'll go take a quick look around outside."

"Thank you," Binalie said, sounding a bit relieved. "This way, Master Doriana."

By the time Tories returned from his sweep of the surrounding area, Binalie, Corf, and Doriana had taken up seats in the greenhouse's underground storeroom. "All clear," the Jedi confirmed, lowering the trap door back into place and plunging the space into complete darkness. "Go ahead, Corf."

A moment later he found himself squinting as the boy flicked on a small ceiling light. "All right, Master Doriana," Binalie said. "Let's hear it."

"This is a soldier's ID," Doriana said, producing a datacard. "I took it from a dead clone trooper lieutenant. Normally, it contains nothing but name, rank, and operating number. A field officer's card, however, also has something called a contingency deployment profile. It gives detailed instructions as to where and how to regroup in case of command structure disruption or the kind of disaster we've just experienced."

"I've never heard of anything like that," Binalie said.

"It's not well advertised, for obvious reasons," Doriana said dryly. "For the same reasons, the information's also not easy to access."

"But you can do that?"

"Yes," Doriana said. "By morning, when the townspeople are allowed to move around outdoors again, you and Master Tories should be able to casually travel to the rendezvous point and make contact with the survivors of last night's battle."

"Just the two of us?" Tories asked. "You're not coming?"

Doriana shook his head. "Now that the Separatists are in control here, I need to keep as low a profile as possible. My face might have been seen in the background on one of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine's broadcasts, and I can't take the risk that someone will recognize me. I can give you an authorization datacard, though, that will confirm you have the authority to give them orders."

"Wait a second," Binalie said, frowning. "What orders?"

"We have to get Roshton and his people out of there, Lord Binalie," Doriana said, his voice suddenly low and sincere and very persuasive. "The longer they're trapped inside Spaarti, the weaker and more vulnerable to attack they'll become. Don't forget, all those techs he took in with him probably weren't carrying soldiers' field packs, which means the whole group is starting out critically low on food and water. If we let them get too weak, our chances of getting them out alive will slip from poor to nonexistent."

"And you don't think the Republic will send help?" Corf asked quietly.

Tories focused on the youth. It was remarkable, he thought distantly, how rapidly Corf had grown up over the past few days. He'd started out as a cheerful, carefree boy, content to track down siviliv weeds or just hang out with Cartao's resident Jedi Guardian.

And then Doriana had arrived, and the events that had followed had turned Corf's home and his neighborhood into a war zone. Now, he was quieter, more thoughtful, more brooding.

The war had come to Cartao. Sadly, it had also come to Corf Binalie.

"I don't know, Master Binalie," Doriana admitted, his voice as grave as the boy's. "I've spoken with Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, and I know he truly wants to help. The question is whether there are any Republic forces strong

enough and close enough to deal with this particular Separatist army. I'm sure you understand that there are many other worlds and systems out there in equally desperate situations."

He looked at Tories. "Unless there are other forces available that I don't know about?"

Tories frowned. "What do you mean?"

For a moment, Doriana gazed at him as if trying to read something hidden. Then, almost too casually, he shrugged.

"Nothing," he said. "I just thought you might have a line to-never mind."

He gestured to the trap door above them. "I'd suggest the three of you go back up and get some sleep," he said. "I need to stay down here for awhile and get this contingency deployment decrypted."

Binalie looked at Tories, his eyebrows lifted slightly. Tories shrugged microscopically in return. He could sense an air of secretive-ness surrounding Doriana's mind, but that could be nothing more than the natural caution of a man dealing with high-level military security. "All right," Binalie said. "Let us know when you're ready to come back up."

"I will," Doriana promised, turning off the light so the others could open the trap door without giving their presence away.

"Good-night. And don't worry," he added, his tone suddenly thoughtful in the dark. "I have a feeling that by tomorrow night this will all be over."

There had been seven possible rendezvous points listed on the contingency deployment datacard, ranked in descending order of preference. The first, one of the hangars at the spaceport, was already occupied by Separatist forces busily working on damaged vehicles. The second, a warehouse on the northern edge of the city, had been effectively demolished in the night's battle. At the third, an automated hydroelectric plant straddling the Quatreen River, Tories and Binalie found the Republic forces.

"This is all rather irregular," their commanding officer, a young-looking lieutenant, said as he handed back the introductory datacard Doriana had

given them. "But it does seem to be in order." He gave a hand signal, and the ring of clone troopers that had suddenly appeared on their third step through the door lowered their blasters. "I'm Lieutenant Laytron. What's this all about?"

"What it's about is a couple hundred Republic troops and a thousand Republic techs trapped inside the Spaarti Creations plant," Tories told him.

"Yes; Commander Roshton's group," Laytron said. "We've been in brief contact with him. It sounds like they're making good progress on whatever the project is they're working on in there."

"That's nice to know," Binalie said sourly. "Did he happen to mention food or water or other irrelevant subjects?"

Laytron regarded him coolly. "For the moment, he seems to be doing all right."

"Which is a complete illusion," Tories pointed out. "And you know it."

"The question is, what are you doing to do about it?" Binalie added.

"Look around you, gentlemen," Laytron said darkly. "We hit Cartao with ten gunships and four hundred fifty officers and men. I'm the last officer still alive, and I have exactly two hundred thirty-three troops - and no vehicles-left to work with. Balance that against probably two thousand functional combat droids, plus STAPs and battle tanks, and you're talking seriously poor odds. I'm cut off from higher authority, and I can't legally justify taking action on my own without a reasonable chance of success. That chance doesn't exist."

"So you're not even going to try?" Binalie demanded.

"I'm sure reinforcements are on the way," Laytron said. "When they arrive, my men and I will be right there fighting beside them. Until then, there's nothing I can do except hope that Roshton's people can hold out."

"What if we lower our expectations a little?" Tories suggested.

"Instead of defeating the Separatists, how about if we just get Roshton and his people out?"

"Leaving the place open for the Separatists to move in?" The lieutenant shook his head. "I'm sorry, but our mission parameters were very specific on that point."

"Then you condemn those troops and civilians in there to death," Binalie shot back, starting to sound angry. "Roshton won't surrender - he's too stubborn for anything that sensible. Do your mission parameters have anything to say about that!"

"We understand your orders, Lieutenant," Tories said, throwing Binalie a warning look. "But what if the Separatists didn't know Roshton's people had escaped?"

The other's eyes narrowed. "Explain."

"I'm sure you came here equipped with a map of the area," Tories said. "Do you remember how Spaarti Creations is laid out? A central manufacturing plant, plus three underground Outlinks two to five kilometers away for storage and product transfer?"

"All of them connected to the main plant via underground tunnels," Laytron said, nodding. "Unfortunately, the Separatists have the same maps we do. They've got the Outlinks and their tunnels covered."

"Actually," Tories said, "they don't."

He lifted his eyebrows at Binalie. The other still wasn't happy about this, Tories could tell, but he'd made up his mind to go through with it. "The fact is, Lieutenant, that the maps are wrong," Binalie said. "We've actually built a fourth Outlink, west and a little south of the plant and about two kilometers away. It's not quite ready yet, which is why it's not on any of the official maps. But the Outlink structure itself is built."

"More to the point, so is the connecting tunnel," Tories said "The only thing missing is the opening into the main complex itself."

"Which a lightsaber-equipped Jedi could easily remedy," Laytron said, sounding thoughtful.

"Exactly," Tories agreed. "If you can stage some kind of diversion to draw the roving patrols away from that part of the grounds, I should be able to slip in and get Roshton's people out without the Separatists being any the wiser."

"Interesting idea," Laytron agreed. "You have any particular diversion in mind?"

"We were hoping you could come up with something," Tories said.

"I'm sure you have a better grasp of the military situation than either of us do."

"Well, there's one obvious possibility," Laytron said. "With their control ship destroyed, they have to be running their droid army off the secondary control matrix they brought down here with them. If we threaten that, they'll have no choice but to respond."

"Good idea," Binalie grunted. "Question is, where is it?"

"It's not in one of the battle tanks or MTT transports," Laytron said. "There's only so much miniaturization you can do with something like that. It therefore has to be in one of the landing ships."

"Unless it's not even in this area," Binalie pointed out. "There are about a million square kilometers of empty space out there where they could have hidden it."

"No," Laytron said, shaking his head. "There's no combat droid presence anywhere else on the planet, at least nothing serious. Neimoidians aren't nearly daring enough to leave something that important lying around without a full defense screen around it. No, it's definitely in one of the landing ships. Question is, which one?"

An image flashed back to Tories' memory: hurrying through the darkness across the plant rooftop, noticing the STAPs circling the first landing ship that had put down by the plant's west door. "It's in the first one," he said. "The one sitting right beside the plant."

"How do you know?" Laytron asked, frowning.

"It was under heavy guard during the battle last night," Tories told him. "If the Neimoidians are as nervous as you say, they'd certainly want it where their ground forces can protect it at the same time they're protecting the plant."

"Besides, the plant's the one place on Cartao both sides are intent on protecting," Binalie agreed. "I think Jedi Tories is right."

"I suppose," Laytron said doubtfully. "That's going to make for a much trickier diversion, though. The Outlink isn't all that far from the siege line around the plant, and from what you said it sounds like the tunnel passes almost directly beneath the landing ship."

"Are you saying there's no way to do it?" Binalie asked. Laytron smiled tightly. "Not at all," he said. "When did you want to start this operation?"

"As soon as possible," Tories said. "It would be nice to get to them while they still have the strength to walk out under their own power."

"Fine," Laytron said, waving over one of the clone troopers. "This afternoon, just before sundown, then. I suggest, Master Tories, that you be ready."

"Master Tories?" Corf's voice called softly. "It's time."

Tories blinked his eyes open, letting the Jedi meditation trance fade away into the corners of his mind. Corf was standing over his cot, a pinched look on his face. "Thank you, Corf," Tories said, yawning and stretching his arms and hands. "Where's your father?"

"He left with Master Doriana and that Republic lieutenant about an hour ago," Corf said. "Dad said you were supposed to meet him at Outlink Four."

"I know," Tories said, glancing at his chrono. Still early. Plenty of time for a nice casual stroll through the woods west of Spaarti Creations. "How are you holding up?"

The boy shrugged. "Okay, I guess," he said. "A little worried."

"No need for that," Tories assured him. "I'll make sure your father stays clear of the fighting."

"I know," Corf said. "Dad promised me that, too. I'm mostly worried about you."

"I'll be fine," Tories said, smiling. "I'm a Jedi, remember?"

"Oh, that's right," Corf said. He tried to smile in return, but his heart clearly wasn't in it. "I forget sometimes."

"Well, don't," Tories admonished him lightly as he tucked his lightsaber inside his robes. "Stay out of sight and trouble, and I'll see you later."

"Okay," Corf said; and to Tories' surprise, he stepped forward and gave the Jedi a quick hug. "Be careful."

Tories had spent part of the day wondering about Laytron's seemingly casual choice of timing for the operation. It was only as he slipped off the Binalie estate and made his way westward through the edge of Foulahn City that he realized the timing hadn't been nearly as random as he'd first thought. At sunset, most of the enemy forces surrounding Spaarti would have to face directly into the setting sun to see Roshton's quiet exit from Outlink Four. Even droid optical sensors had trouble with direct sunlight, and Tories' estimation of the young lieutenant had gone up as he realized the young man had taken that weakness into account.

Twice along the way, Tories had to take quick cover as a pair of droids on wide picket marched past. But he'd planned for possible delays when he'd scheduled his wake-up call, and he reached the flat, sod-covered roof of Outlink Four with time to spare.

Binalie was waiting beneath a cluster of trees, along with a pair of armored clone troopers. "Master Tories," Binalie greeted the Jedi, his voice and sense tight with nervous anticipation.

"Anyone see you?"

"No one shot at me, anyway," Tories told him, eyeing the camouflaged roof. "We aren't going to have to raise the whole roof to get in, are we?"

Binalie shook his head. "There's a service stairway along the side."

"Then let's get to it," Tories said, peering into the sky. A dozen STAPs were circling in the east, patrolling the sky over the plant and the landing ship beside it.

"Shouldn't we wait for the diversion to start?" Binalie asked.

"We can't afford to," Tories said. "We'll need every bit of diversion time just to move all those people out of the plant."

"You're right." Binalie took a deep breath, and set off across the open ground. "Follow me."

The section of roof over the service stairway swung open with gratifying speed and silence. Binalie led the way down the steps, then waited at the bottom for the others to catch up before using the small control panel attached to the railing to seal the top again. "All the wiring is in place," he said as he flicked on a pair of glow rods and handed one to Tories. "But I thought running any power in here, even just enough to handle the lights, might be risky."

"Good point," Tories agreed, turning to the clone troopers. "You two stay here and guard the exit," he ordered.

"Acknowledged," one of them said.

Tories nodded, and he and Binalie set off at a quick jog down the empty tunnel. Ten minutes later, they reached the other end.

"There should be a set of pumps right here, and the intake for the tunnel's ventilator system about here," Binalie said, pointing out spots to the left and right of the wall. "It would make this operation a whole lot cheaper if you could manage to miss both of them."

"I'll do my best," Tories said, igniting his lightsaber. Pushing the tip of the blade carefully through the center of Binalie's indicated safe zone, he began to cut.

A minute later had carved a man-sized rectangle. Closing down the lightsaber, he stretched out with the Force and deftly pulled away the half-meter-thick section of wall.

To find himself gazing down the muzzles of a half dozen blaster rifles.
"Commander Roshton?" he called.

The muzzles instantly lifted. "About time," Roshton said, stepping into view in front of his troops, a grim look on his face. He was equipped for action, Tories noted, wearing his usual clone trooper comlink headset and a pair of bolstered blasters on his belt.. "I was starting to wonder if you'd been caught."

"What are you talking about?" Binalie asked. "We're right on time."

"You're two minutes late," Roshton corrected tartly. "If Lieutenant Laytron is on schedule, the diversion will be starting in fourteen minutes. We want to be already moving people out the other end of the tunnel by then."

"Then we'd better get started," Tories said. "Your people ready to move?"

In answer, Roshton lifted a hand. The clone troopers who'd been pointing their rifles at Tories lifted the weapons into carry position across their chests and passed single-file through the newly made opening. Reforming into ranks of three, they set off down the tunnel at a quick jog. They were followed by another squad of six, and another, and another. "What about the techs?" Tories asked as the fifth batch of troopers jogged past him.

"When will they be coming through?"

"When we've got enough firepower at the other end to protect them," Roshton grunted, stepping through himself and giving Binalie a nudge. "Come on, both of you. Our turn to move." The clone troopers who'd gone on ahead of them were waiting at the far end of the tunnel when Tories, Binalie, and Roshton arrived. "Two minutes to go," the commander said, consulting his chrono. "What's cover like up there?"

Binalie opened his mouth to answer - "Open space for three meters to the north, twenty meters to the south," one of the clone troopers they'd left behind on guard duty spoke up. "Tree cover begins five meters to the east and remains intermittent."

"Not perfect, but it'll do," Roshton decided. "Line up on the stairway. Lord Binalie, is there any trick to operating the exit door?"

"The controls are right there," Binalie said, pointing to the panel, his tone suddenly sounding strange. "But-"

"But what?" Roshton demanded, glaring at him.

Binalie threw a quick, ambiguous glance at Tories. "Nothing," he muttered. "It'll keep."

"Fine." Roshton looked up the stairway as his troopers headed up. "Get in position," he called softly. "We break cover at the sound of the first shot."

"Two minutes to go," Lieutenant Laytron said, consulting his chrono. "All squads, report by number."

He fell silent, listening intently to the reports coming in over his headset. Doriana found himself gazing off to the north, across the open grassland and the picket line of combat droids standing guard there. The force was largely a token one, of course, since there were no doors or windows on the southern side of the plant. The main droid army, plus all their remaining AAT battle tanks, was concentrated around the more vulnerable eastern, western, and northern approaches.

But even a single person or machine on that forbidden stretch of lawn was anathema to the Cranscoc twillers who were the actual heart of the Spaarti operation. They were probably still twitching their indignation, in fact, over all those droids standing around out there. But of course, the Separatist commanders didn't care about that.

On the other hand, since the plant's tooling was still set for the cloning cylinders the Republic forces had been sent to Cartao to manufacture, Roshton probably didn't much care if the twillers were upset, either. Two huge political systems, locked in a massive battle of wills and weapons and death, completely oblivious as to how their actions affected those around them. But those actions frequently involved a lot of unexpected collateral damage. That was a lesson someone was going to learn today.

"One minute," Laytron said. "Stand ready."

Doriana took a deep breath, willing calmness into himself. He had carried out his part of the plan, he knew, maneuvering both sides to precisely the right

place and the right time. The rest was now out of his hands, and he could feel the churning sense of frustration that always came upon him at times like this.

"And... go."

With the multi-level roar of a dozen different engine models, a dozen commandeered civilian landspeeders leaped into view from concealment among the hills dotting the landscape, each loaded with anywhere from four to eight clone troopers. Quickly, they maneuvered around their hills to form an attack line on the southern edge of the grassland. Then, as the enemy pickets and the high-flying STAPs seemed to take notice, the engine pitches changed, and the vehicles set off at full speed toward the plant.

"Stand by, cover fire," Laytron ordered. The STAPs were swooping in to the attack, their twin blasters spitting fire at the landspeeders. Ahead of the advancing landspeeders, the picket forces were drawing inward to form a solid counterline between the clone troopers and the plant. Their blasters opened up, too, searching for the range...

"Fire," Laytron said.

The tops of a dozen nearby hills suddenly blurred as camouflage covers were thrown off and heavy weapons scavenged from damaged gunships and AATs were swung around to bear on the enemy. Laser cannon bolts sizzled across the incoming STAPs, destroying half a dozen in the first salvo and sending the rest twisting away into evasive maneuvers. A pair of missiles streaked from one of the hills to hit the droid counterline dead center. When the smoke, dust, and purple afterimage of the explosion cleared from Dorian's sight, there was nothing left of the picket line but a crater and a hundred smoking pieces of combat droid.

"Here they come," Roshton murmured, pointing to the east. Dorian shifted his eyes that direction. Three AAT battle tanks had appeared around the side of the building, laying down fire of their own as they lumbered toward the incoming landspeeders.

"They're too late," Dorian said, estimating distances and speeds.

"Absolutely," Laytron agreed as the hilltop covering fire shifted aim and began pummeling the AATs. "The fatal flaw of droid armies, Master Dorian: the soldiers actually on the scene can't think or anticipate."

Doriana smiled. "Which is why the Republic is going to win."

The battle tanks were still firing uselessly as the landspeeders reached the plant. Even before the vehicles came to a complete stop the clone troopers were leaping out, slinging their heavy rifles over their shoulders as they formed up beside the wall. The first two dozen to reach position lifted liquid-cable guns and fired upward. The grapplers caught the top edge of the rooftop, and a moment later, the soldiers were being reeled swiftly upward as their comrades held guard position beneath them. The remaining STAPs swung to this new threat, managing to kill two of the rising clone troopers before fire from the troopers below eliminated that threat.

The first wave reached the roof and scrambled up onto it, unslinging their rifles and setting up a defensive perimeter. The second wave was already halfway up the side of the building by the time they were in position, with the final wave just leaving the ground.

"And that's that," Laytron said with grim satisfaction as the clone troopers regrouped and started across the rooftop, weapons at the ready. "The Separatists can't fire on them without risking damage to the plant, but they'll be able to fire on the landing ship as soon as they're in range. Is that the sort of diversion you were thinking about, Master Dorian?"

Doriana smiled. "Yes, Lieutenant," he said softly. "That should do nicely."

The sounds of distant blaster fire were clearly audible as Tories emerged from the tunnel into the late afternoon sunlight.

"Sounds like it's started," he muttered to Binalie as the two of them raced for the trees where most of the clone troopers who had gone before them had already taken cover. "I just hope they can keep it up until everyone's out."

"Doesn't matter," Binalie said as they reached the trees.

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter?" Tories asked as they squatted beneath the cover of a wide-crested forlaine bush.

"That's the whole point of this exercise."

Binalie shook his head. "Maybe it was your point, and mine," he said, his voice tense. "But it wasn't Roshton's. He has no intention of getting those techs out."

"What are you talking about?" Tories demanded, frowning.

"Didn't you hear him?" Binalie countered. "Him and his soldiers? He asked about cover, and they gave him the stuff north, south, and east. They never said anything about cover to the west; and he never asked."

Tories blinked as the memory of that conversation flashed back to him. Binalie was right: Roshton hadn't inquired about conditions to the west. Yet west was the obvious direction for anyone fleeing the plant to go.

But if they weren't leaving...

His eyes flicked around, looking for Roshton, understanding suddenly stabbing into his stomach. He spotted the commander standing beside the tunnel entrance, gazing down the stairway as clone troopers continued to file out.

Tories rose to his feet and started toward him. He'd taken perhaps three steps when Roshton lifted a hand and pointed east. And suddenly, the army was on the move, blasters at the ready, running toward the landing ship towering above the treetops. The last of the troopers was passing Roshton when Tories caught up with him. "What are you doing?" he demanded, catching the commander's arm. "This was supposed to be a rescue mission."

"Out of my way, Jedi," Roshton snapped, shrugging off his arm. "Of course it's a rescue mission. It's a rescue of Lord Binalie's precious manufacturing plant."

"But..."

"No buts," Roshton cut him off, gesturing with his blaster. "This is our one chance to get into that landing ship and destroy the droid control matrix. You want to help, fine, we'd be glad to have you. If not, just get out of our way."

Tories looked back at Binalie, still crouching beside his bush, his face rigid with anger and fear and frustration. "Go back to the estate," he called to the other. "I'll meet you there."

Binalie's eyes flicked over Tories' shoulder toward the plant.

"Go," Tories repeated.

Binalie's expression still looked pinched, but he nodded. "All right."

He slipped away through the trees, and Tories turned back to Roshton. "I'll come with you," he said, pulling out his lightsaber. "But we will talk about this later."

"Sure," Roshton grunted. "Come on."

They headed off after the soldiers, dodging between trees and around bushes. Occasionally Tories caught a glimpse of white armor ahead of them, but the clone troopers were traveling at least as fast as they were and had a fair head start on top of it. "So what's the plan?" he asked Roshton. "The new revised plan, I mean."

"Laytron's got men up on the plant roof laying down fire," Roshton panted. "The droids by the landing ship are currently trying to pick them off without damaging the plant. With luck, they should all have their backs to us when we hit them." Tories grimaced. And when they found their army in a crossfire, what would the Neimoidians controlling the droids do? Whatever they deemed necessary to defend themselves, including wrecking the Spaarti plant? Probably.

It was up to Tories to make sure that didn't happen.

"First elements have reached firing position," Roshton reported, pressing his headset tighter against his ear. "Following units are fanning out. If we're lucky, and they're not spotted-" He broke off, and Tories caught his breath as the volume of the firing ahead suddenly changed. "They were," Roshton growled.

"All units: fire at will."

He leaped ahead, picking up his pace. "Spotted?" Tories asked, catching up with him.

"By one of the guards at the landing ramp," Roshton confirmed as weapons of a different pitch joined the sounds ahead. "But we've still got the advantage."

They ran another fifty meters through the forest. And then, suddenly, they were there.

Square in the middle of a pitched battle.

Roshton ducked into the partial cover of a nearby tree, his blaster already blazing away against the enemy. Tories stopped beside a tree of his own, trying to get a quick sense of the action. Two AAT battle tanks, which had been facing the door into the plant, were trying to turn around to deal with this new threat, their maneuvering slow and awkward as they fought the tangle of underbrush and heavy fire from two directions. Advancing briskly toward Roshton's group of clone troopers were three ranks of super battle droids supported by a few D60 assault droids. The whole line was taking considerable damage, but was still coming.

The tanks, Tories decided, were his first priority. "I'm going in," he called to Roshton over the noise, pointing toward the tanks. "Cover me."

"Right," Roshton shouted back as Tories ignited his lightsaber.

"All units: cover fire left!"

The rain of fire from the clone trooper blasters abruptly changed focus, concentrating all their fury on the left flank of the advancing forces and blowing the droids on that side into a chaos of shards and rubble and smoke. Gathering his feet beneath him, Tories ducked under the friendly fire and dodged around the end of the disintegrating enemy line.

The droids in the AATs saw him coming, of course. Even as their primary laser cannon began chewing up the landscape along the right flank of the Republic forces, the short-range defensive blasters on either side of the main air-cooling intake began firing at him. Tories' lightsaber flashed in answer, deflecting the bolts away or bouncing them into the backs of the advancing droids whenever he could manage it.

He reached the nearest AAT and jumped up onto the front. Positioning himself in front of the air intake where he was out of reach of both defensive blasters, he stabbed his lightsaber downward through the heavy armor into the forward repulsor disk. The vehicle pitched forward, its nose slamming into the ground like a quadruped that had had both front legs kicked out from under it. Tories leaped straight up as it dug itself half a meter into the dirt, landing just in front of the top hatch, and with three quick slashes sliced off the primary laser cannon and the two side-mounted secondary laser guns.

The second AAT had abandoned its attack on the clone troopers and had swung to this new threat. For a moment Tories stayed where he was, balancing on the now badly sloped top of the grounded battle tank as he deflected a couple of shots from the second tank's defensive blasters. One of the bolts went straight back down the blaster's muzzle, eliciting a burping sort of explosion from the weapon. Taking advantage of the momentary chaos inside the tank, Tories stretched out to the Force and made a giant leap across to the second tank, dealing with its primary and secondary lasers as he had with the first. Leaning over the hatch, he swung his lightsaber one more time, cutting off the vehicle's command receiver antennas.

A droideka appeared from around the landing ramp, bouncing a little as it rolled across the uneven ground. Stretching out to the Force, Tories lifted one of the two secondary laser guns he'd cut off the first AAT and sent it flying into the center of the wheel shape. There was a screech of stressed metal, and the droideka came to an abrupt halt. For another second it held position, its micro-repulsors fighting to keep it balanced.

Then, something inside it failed, and it toppled ignominiously over onto its side.

A stutter of multiple blaster fire sliced through the air over Tories' head. He ducked reflexively, turning to see a group of super battle droids disintegrating behind him. The friendly fire was coming from above, he saw, and he looked up to see a group of clone troopers firing from the edge of the Spaarti roof. He waved his thanks; in response, one of them jabbed a hand toward the landing ship base.

Tories shifted his eyes that direction. Another battle tank was lumbering down the ramp, clearly intent on joining the battle. He gave a quick acknowledging

wave to the rooftop snipers, then jumped off the crippled vehicle he was still standing on and began to weave his way through the chaos toward the landing ship. If he could slip up onto the ramp beneath the tank, he might be able to take out its repulsorlift coils and disable it on the spot.

"Jedi!"

Tories paused, turning as the faint shout came to him over the noise of the battle. The advancing droids were closing on the Republic forces, considerably fewer now than had started, but still coming. The clone troopers didn't seem to need his help; but there'd been a definite note of urgency in that call.

"Jedi!"

This time he was able to get the direction of the shout, and he looked over to where Roshton was standing beside his tree. The commander was looking back at him, beckoning frantically toward himself. Frowning, Tories changed direction, lightsaber blazing as he again skirted the droid attack line to the relative safety of the trees. "What is it?" he called as he came within shouting distance of Roshton.

"Didn't you hear me?" Roshton shouted back. "The Jedi!"

"What about me?" Tories demanded, thoroughly confused now.

"Not you." Roshton jabbed a finger skyward. "The Jedi.

"The Jedi have come."

"The Jedi?" Doriana demanded.

"You got it," Lieutenant Laytron said, a mixture of surprise, hope, and relief in his voice as he peered into the eastern sky.

"A whole assault transport full of them, the message said, heading in to help. We've got orders to pull back and give them room."

"But that's impossible," Doriana objected, watching the other's face carefully. "Where could they have come from?"

But if there was any doubt at all in Laytron's mind, none of it reached his face or voice. "I don't know, and I don't care," the younger man declared. "All units: pull back. Where?" He tilted his head upward. "Got it," he confirmed, pointing to the sky. Doriana followed the direction of his finger. There, in the distance, he could see a dark speck moving swiftly toward them.

"Hustle on that pull-back," Laytron ordered. "They're on their way."

He grinned tightly at Doriana. "Now we're going to see some serious work."

Doriana didn't answer. On the near edge of the rooftop the clone troopers had made it back to their ascent lines and were sliding back down them toward the waiting landspeeders. The approaching air vehicle was growing steadily larger, and he could see now that it was indeed a Republic assault transport.

And as it grew closer, it opened fire.

Laytron inhaled sharply. "What are they doing?" he breathed.

"They're..."

"Aren't they firing on the landing ship?" Doriana asked.

"They're firing on the plant," Laytron snapped, pulling his headset voice pickup closer to his mouth. "Republic transport, cease firing on the plant. Repeat, cease firing on the plant!"

The only response was an intensification of the transport's fire, alternating now between the plant and the enemy STAPs swarming to engage it. For a long moment, the Republic and Separatist forces traded fire as the assault transport continued racing forward.

Then, without warning, the vehicle suddenly dipped off its approach. Doriana held his breath as the STAR attack was joined by blaster and laser bolts from the Separatist ground forces encircling the plant. The transport dipped even further...

And as Laytron reeled off a string of helpless curses, Doriana watched as it plunged straight through the plant's roof.

For what seemed like a small eternity, nothing happened. Then, with a horrible series of muffled explosions, whole sections of the roof blew skyward, scattering fragments all around like small erupting volcanoes. The building's walls followed, bulging and cracking and finally shattering into mudslides of rubble. Another, louder explosion echoed across the landscape, and through the roiling smoke and debris Doriana caught a glimpse of a fireball burning into the sky from the western side of the plant.

"They've stopped," Laytron said dully.

"What?" Doriana asked.

The lieutenant pointed wearily across the lawn. "The droids," he said. "They've frozen up. That last blast must have taken out the landing ship and control matrix."

"I see," Doriana said slowly. "Do we count this as a victory?"

Laytron snorted. "The Jedi might," he said bitterly. "Who knows how they think? But the rest of us certainly won't."

"To save the world," Doriana murmured the old cynic's saying, "we had to destroy it."

"That's about it." Laytron shook his head tiredly. "Come on. Let's go find Commander Roshton."

Lord Binalie said very little as the three of them walked across the littered floor, their boots crunching through the remains of what had once been Spaarti Creations. Corf, walking at his father's side, was even quieter. "I don't know what to say," Tories said softly as they came to a halt beside a mixed group of Cranscoc and human bodies. "Except that I'm very sorry."

"Of course you are," Binalie said, his voice under rigid control. "You're sorry, Commander Roshton is sorry, Master Doriana is sorry. I'm sure the entire Jedi Council would be sorry, too, if they would pause long enough in their search for someone to blame for their part in this."

He turned dead eyes on Tories. "What good is any of it?"

Tories shook his head. "None," he conceded. "I don't suppose there's any chance...?"

"That we can rebuild? With nearly all the twillers dead?" Binalie shook his head. "No. Not for another generation at least. And then only if we can get the Cranscoc to trust us again."

He turned away. "I certainly wouldn't if I were them. Trusting the word of a human is a stupid thing to do."

Tories winced. "I'm sorry," was all he could think of to say.

"I'm sure we'll see you later, Master Tories," Binalie said, not turning back around.

It was a dismissal. "Yes, of course," Tories said. "Good-bye, Lord Binalie. Good-bye, Corf."

Neither of them replied. With a sigh, Tories turned and trudged toward the broken wall where he and the others had come through into the ruined plant, his heart feeling like a lump of blackened and twisted hull metal within him. So, that was that. Despite all his efforts - despite even the efforts of the Republic and Separatist forces, for that matter-Spaarti Creations was gone. Destroyed by carelessness, stupidity, and arrogance.

The carelessness, stupidity, and arrogance of the Jedi.

He closed his eyes briefly against the depth of sadness washing through his soul. Losing the plant was bad enough, but for himself Tories had lost something far more valuable. Binalie was very clearly blaming him personally for the Jedi intrusion, despite the fact that he had had nothing to do with it. And while civility and politeness might eventually come back to their relationship, the trust and friendship that had once been there would probably never return.

And Corf, who had once looked on the old Jedi Guardian with the respect and awe usually accorded to the greatest of heroes, now hated him. And would probably continue to do so for the rest of his life.

He reached what was left of the wall and picked his way over the rubble, an edge of anger stirring through the well of sadness. The Jedi Council could claim as loudly as it wanted that it knew nothing about what had happened here today. But there had been Jedi robes and broken lightsabers among the assault transport's wreckage-Tories had seen them with his own eyes. Someone on Coruscant knew where those Jedi had come from, and who exactly had sent them.

One way or another, Jedi Guardian Jafer Tories was going to track that person down.

The hooded face of Darth Sidious blinked into view above Dorian's holoprojector. "Report."

"The operation has been successful, my lord," Dorian said. "The Spaarti Creations plant has been destroyed."

"And the Jedi?"

"As far as the public is concerned, the blame rests entirely on their shoulders," Dorian said.

"Excellent," Sidious said with satisfaction. "Has anyone expressed interest in examining the assault transport?"

"Commander Roshton suggested it should be done," Dorian said. "But it was a half-hearted remark, focused mainly on seeing whether they could identify who had been aboard from the designs of the various lightsabers in the wreckage."

"Encourage him to continue along that line," Sidious ordered. "By the time he discovers that such an examination is a dead-end, all evidence of the transport's remote-control system will have vanished into the scrap recyclers. " He smiled thinly. "One of the many small advantages of dealing with Jedi, Master Dorian. With a few small props-a robe, a lightsaber, an unrecognizable body-you can easily create the illusion of a fallen hero."

"Indeed, my lord," Dorian agreed. "I presume the remote operator himself will be leaving Cartao soon?"

"He is already gone." There was a pause, and Doriana had the sense of those unseen eyes probing his face. "You still disapprove of this operation, don't you?"

"I don't disapprove, my lord," Doriana hastened to assure him. "But I am still puzzled. Why deliberately destroy Spaarti? It could be of immense service to the Separatists. Why not keep it intact for experimentation and manufacture?"

"Because by its very nature it is indefensible," Sidious told him. "The Republic might instead gain hold of it and could utilize it with equal devastation against us."

He shook his head. "No, Master Doriana. With a wild card of this potential, it's far better to take it off the table entirely." He smiled again. "Especially when other long-term advantages can be squeezed from it."

"That part was most definitely a success," Doriana agreed, nodding. "I don't think Jedi are going to be very welcome on Cartao for a long time to come. Certainly not if Lord Binalie has anything to say about it. Even Tories, who had become something of a hero among the people in all this, is pretty well finished."

"And as the economic ripples of Spaarti's destruction spread through that region, so will that attitude," Sidious said. "The destruction of the Jedi will be only half a victory if the people of the galaxy mourn their loss. Thanks to your work there today, few in Prackla Sector will shed a even tear at their passing."

"Absolutely," Doriana said, nodding. "Have you further orders, my lord?"

"No," Sidious said. "Stay long enough to clean up any final details, then you may report back to your post on Coruscant." The other's head tilted slightly. "One other matter. The reports I saw indicated that the clone cylinders created during the Republic's time in the plant were destroyed in the attack. Is that true?"

"No, my lord," Doriana said. "They were stored in one of the Outlinks several kilometers away from the main complex and made it through undamaged. Supreme Chancellor Palpatine has instructed me to transport them secretly to an old underground fortress on Wayland that he recently reactivated."

"Really," Sidious said thoughtfully. "How many are there?"

"Several thousand." Doriana hesitated. "If you'd like, I could arrange for them to be lost."

Sidious pursed his lips in thought, and Doriana held his breath. It would be easy enough for him to sabotage the transport of the cylinders in transit, of course, or even before they left Cartao. The problem was that with so few people in on the secret, that kind of action would open him up to a dangerously high risk of discovery. Still, if Sidious wanted it done...

But the Sith lord shook his head. "Don't bother," he said, his lips twisting contemptuously. "A few thousand extra cloning tanks will hardly make a difference to the war effort. Let Palpatine have his little trophies."

Quietly, Doriana let out his breath. "Yes, my lord."

"I'll contact you soon," Sidious continued. "Once again, well done. The plan continues to move forward."

"And I look forward to its completion," Doriana said. "Farewell, Lord Sidious."

Sidious smiled. "Until next time, Master Doriana."

Military Folklore

There is a bit of military folklore about the difference between the structure of the Army and the Navy. An admiral had just finished listening to a general explain the OB for a Sector Group, including virtually every conceivable configuration by mission type. This general concluded proudly by calling up numerics which showed that every unit deviated less than two percent from the projected strength on the OB.

The admiral took the podium and holoviewed the naval plan for a Sector Group. After a brief explanation of the theory, the admiral then used his Sector Group as an example of how the naval theory was modified in practice. The general became increasingly impatient as the admiral listed exception after exception. Finally the general interrupted the admiral.

"You don't have an organization, admiral! What you have is nothing like the Army!"

"Yes, general, the Army has its organization. We in the Navy must content ourselves with the control of all known space."

CIS Shadowfeed

Dispatch 14:7:01 Edition

Kuati-Neimoidian Arms Race Escalates

KOTO-SI, NEIMOIDIA - Long-range scanning confirmed that the Republic has increased deployment of defense forces along the outer borders of Kuati space, increasing the number of combat starships holding position between Kuat and Neimoidia.

Less than six parsecs separate Neimoidia and Kuat. Forecasters predict that a decisive push to end the war would result in a heated battle between the two ship-producing systems. "Whenever a campaign to capture Coruscant happens -- and it will happen -- there will be a need to silence Kuat first," said a Trade Federation official who asked not to be identified. "Until then, it's a dejarik game, with each player piling powerful pieces on their side of the board."

The Republic has deployed twenty-four Acclamator-class warships along the outer borders of the Kuat system, in response to the Confederacy staging of a dozen Trade Federation battleships around Balmorra.

Balmorra lies between Kuat and Neimoidia. When Balmorra seceded from the Republic, Kuat abandoned its assets on the factory world, allowing the Techno Union to claim its production plants. Although this was a boon to Confederacy intelligence, the capital assets seized have little tactical value in a war between the two systems.

"Kuat left behind mostly ground-based walkers and heavy vehicles, which would be of little use in what will definitely be a space-based battle. Unlike other worlds, holding Kuat's ground is largely meaningless. It's holding the shipyards that matter," said military analyst Dasken Hobiv.

Orbital screens have been erected around Kuat's most guarded shipyards to dissuade long-range intelligence gathering. Similar sensor-baffling impediments have been erected around the space-based Neimoidian shipyards, while the distance from Republic frontlines have helped insulate Confederacy ship-producing facilities on Foerest and Sluis Van.

Kuat has attempted to infiltrate Neimoidia with modified worker droids equipped with concealed spyware. "Our use of automated workers and sub-

intelligent insectoid drones has prevented the thieving Kuati from stealing any of our secrets," said Techno Union Foreman Wat Tambor of the highly publicized capture of fifteen spy-droids last week.

An unoccupied expanse between both systems has been extensively littered with automated explosive and laser-firing mines. This has effectively shut down a segment of the Hydian Way, forcing most Core-bound traffic to use the Corellian Run instead.

Republic Stifles Non-Military Cloning Research

CORUSCANT NODE -- The Republic Senate passed Decree E49D139.41 yesterday, which effectively prohibits all non-military cloning activity throughout its member worlds. Crafted in an effort to maintain military superiority and to prevent cloning assets from falling into Confederacy hands, the shortsighted law impacts the economy and society of several Republic planets. One world hit particularly hard is Khomm, a Deep Core planet that relies on cloning science for its populace to procreate. Scattered reports from Separatist intelligence indicate therapeutic cloning centers on Lur, Columus, and Arkania have ceased operation. This stands as yet another example of Republic bureaucracy trampling the freedoms of its citizenry.
Republic Holonet News

Republic Holonet News

CORE EDITION | 14:7:02

WAR ON JABIIM "INEVITABLE"

JELWICK, HANDOOINE-Despite last-hour negotiations spearheaded by the Alderaanian Diplomatic Corps, Republic officials have described a war on Jabiim as "inevitable." A sparsely inhabited planet in the neighboring Handooine system has become a Republic staging area for a military engagement likely to start within the standard month.

"We have attempted a diplomatic solution, but the natives of Jabiim do not seem open to peaceful alternatives," Vice Chair Mas Amedda said during an abbreviated Senate session this morning. Citing issues of security, Amedda refused further comment on what he described as a "still-fluid situation." Supreme Chancellor Palpatine was unavailable for comment.

Jabiim has become a political and military hotspot since the majority government chose to side with the Separatists. Jabiimite Spokesbeing Alto Stratus has rebuffed entreaties from the Republic government, despite a vocal loyalist contingent in the Jabiim Congress.

"The Republic is not to be trusted," said Stratus, repeating his often-heard rhetoric in the Caucus Chambers. "They make noises about peaceful resolutions, but only once their army is amassed a short hyper-space jump away. We can feel the weight of those soldiers and their weapons behind every creaky promise the Republic chooses to insult us with."

Republic intelligence reports reveal that Separatists have been supplying the Jabiim ruling government with provisions, weapons, and credits to destroy the vocal loyalists. Republic initiatives have focused on the extradition of the loyalists and the mineral resources that many of them own.

"We cannot let these assets fall into the hands of the enemy," said Senator Orn Free Taa (Ryloth). "Stratus, this silver-tongued holocam-favorite, would have us believe it's the will of his people to secede, but he's being played by the Separatists to grab more ore to build their forces. Jabiim has made its choice, but it's a wrong choice, and we will stop at nothing to correct it."

The Jabiim campaign will not be easy, for the world is perpetually deluged by storms that will complicate any surface-based initiatives. The world experiences less than five days per standard year without precipitation, and the muddy surfaces are unstable and constantly shifting. Visibility for infantry units would be hampered, and air support is nearly impossible due to electrically charged atmospheric disturbances.

"A war on Jabiim would be a dirty war in which our forces would have to battle with the elements as well as the droid armies of the Confederacy," Senator Bail Organa (Alderaan) told reporters. "There will be Republic casualties, I'm afraid, and it is my fervent hope that such a costly campaign can be avoided."

On Handooine, the amassed fighting forces wait patiently for the order to strike. With the arrival of the Dominance and its troops, an entire corps awaits deployment to Jabiim. Given the inhospitable climate, much of the vehicular support of the Jabiim initiative consists of walker vehicles. Hundreds of AT-XTs,

AT-TEs, and AT-AT walkers are being carefully prepared and maintained for deployment at a moment's notice.

The Jedi Council has not announced which generals will be assigned to the campaign.

Republic Commando: Odds

Note: This story takes place 65 to 67 days after the events of the novel Star Wars Republic Commando: Triple Zero.

Everyone knows that Intel's about as reliable as a Weequay quay ball. But that doesn't mean it doesn't have its uses. Sometimes it's the lies and myths that tell you everything you need to know.

place and time: separatist droid factory. olanet. siskeen system -460 standard days after the battle of geonosis.

Atin liked a big, satisfying explosion as much as the next man. But there were better ways of putting droids out of action than turning them into shrapnel. He just didn't agree with the technical details this time.

"Ordo told me you were argumentative," said Prudii.

Atin bristled. But coming from Ordo, it might have been a compliment. "I just want to get it right."

Atin edged along the gantry above the foundry floor, feeling along the rust-crust metal railing for a sound section that would take the weight of a rappelling line with a fully-kitted Republic commando on the end. The only illumination was the red-hot glow from the durasteel sheets feeding into the rollers; droids didn't need light to see. The night-vision filter in his visor had kicked in the moment he and Prudii entered the factory.

It was a high-value target. The factory was said to be one of the largest outside Geonosis. Again, intel seemed to have lost something in the translation.

Atin found what felt like a solid section of railing and checked the metal's integrity with his gauntlet sensor. Flakes of corroded metal fell to the gantry floor, and he brushed them carefully into a gap to hide signs of entry.

"Five per cent extra carvanium does the job." Prudii - Null ARC trooper N-5 - pulled out his belt toolkit. "Trust me. I've done a lot of these."

"I know."

"And? Did it work? It worked."

"Okay, I'm not a metallurgist."

Prudii peered over the rail as he checked his rappelling line. "Neither am i, but I knew a man who was."

Atin didn't ask about his use of the past tense. He was both an assassin and a saboteur, and at the top of his game in both fields. Until Atin got to know him as well he knew his Null brothers, Ordo and Mereel, he would err on the side of caution. Nulls were as mad as a box of Hapan chags. There were only six of them in the army, but it felt like a lot more.

Omega Squad was back at barracks again for a few days. Atin missed the rest of his team, but he'd volunteered for this mission to learn a technique. And learn he would.

I can do this. Argumentative? I just like things to be right.

Prudii dropped down the line, his kama spreading in the air as he descended in complete silence - no mean feat for an 85-kilo man in full armour. Atin took a breath and paused before dropping down after him. If a droid detected them, the mission was over. They'd have to blow the factory - again. And then the Seps would switch production elsewhere - again. If they just churned out millions of substandard tinnies, crippled at the molecular level by a little tweak in the automation, it would save a lot of hunting.

"Nothing personal," Atin muttered, wondering what went on in their self-aware metal heads. "It's you or me, vode."

"What?" Prudii's voice filled Atin's helmet.

"Just trying not to be... organicist."

"Don't give me all that droids-have-rights osik."

"Wouldn't dream of it," said Atin.

He landed next to the Null lieutenant, and they skirted the assembly line. On the factory floor, 20 metres below ground level, the rhythm of fully automated production continued uninterrupted. Only worker-droids were around during the night shift. Durasteel sheets rumbled between the rollers, were caught by giant claws, and moved to the next assembly line for cutting. At the end of the conveyor belt, a clamshell press shaped the torso cases of battle droids around a form before dragging them through cooling vats with a hiss of steam. The whole place smelled of soot and burning.

A maintenance droid -just a box on wheels with a dozen multifunctional arms - trundled past Atin and Prudii, as blind to the electromagnetic profile of their armour as all his kind were. Atin still held his breath as it passed. But no sound escaped from his sealed helmet. He could yell his head off at Prudii and nobody else would hear a thing. The deafening noise of the assembly line would have drowned out all sound anyway.

"There it is." Prudii pointed to what looked like a run of oversize lockers on a far wall. Their hinges were as corroded as the gantry. "I hate rust. Don't they do any housework around here?"

Atin eased the cover open carefully. No, the Seps didn't inspect the automated settings very often, as long as the stateboard reported that everything was running okay. Inside, racks of data wafers fed template information to the different production lines, dictating wire gauges, alloy proportions, component ratings and the thousands of other parameters that went go into making a battle droid. Atin and Prudii had just opened up the brain of the entire factory. It was time for a little surgery.

"How many times have you done this?" asked Atin.

Prudii sucked his teeth audibly and rocked his head, counting. "Lots," he said at last.

"And they haven't noticed yet?"

"No. I'd say not." Prudii clipped bypass wires to the bays above and below the slot to isolate it. "Just so I don't trigger the safety cut-out." He inspected a substitute data wafer - apparently identical in every way to the Separatist ones - and inserted it into the slot. "This'll make sure the foundry adds too much carvanium to the durasteel, and that the quality control sampling reads it as normal levels. See?" He pointed to the readout on the panel. A cluster of figures read 0003. "Machines believe what you tell 'em. Just like people."

"You sure that's enough?"

"Any higher and it'll be too brittle to pass through the rollers. Then they'll spot the problem too soon."

"Okay..."

Prudii took a breath. He was remarkably patient for a Null. "Look, when these chakaare reach the battlefield, the overpressure from a basic ion shell will crack their cases like Naboo crystal." He removed the bypass clips and attached them to bays flanking a vertical slot further up the panel. More spiked wafers replaced genuine chips. "And just in case they get lucky and spot that little quality-control problem, this one will reduce the wire gauge just enough so that when it takes a heavy current, it'll short. I like to introduce a different batch of problems for each factory, in case they spot a pattern. How much more of this do I have to debate with you?"

"Just checking, sir."

"Drop the 'sir.' I hate it."

It was a precise calculation: just enough to render entire production runs of droids so vulnerable on the battlefield that they were almost useless, but not enough to flag the problem when the units were checked before being shipped from the factory - checked by service droids using the same falsified data.

Prudii had to be doing something right. The kill ratio had climbed from 20-to-one to 50-to-one in a matter of a few months. The tinnies still hadn't

overrun the Republic, despite the claims that they could. While Prudii worked, factory droids skimmed past him, oblivious. He stepped out of 'ù their way and let them pass.

"Is it true you've tracked down General Grievous?" asked Atin. "'Cos I know that two of you were tasked to hunt him..."

"Not me. Ask Jaing. Or Kom'rk. Their job, not mine."

Atin hadn't met them yet. "If they've found him, the war's as good as over."

"You reckon? Well, it doesn't look like it's over yet."

Atin took the hint and didn't ask about Grievous again. He kept watch, DC-17 rifle ready, anxious not to use it for once. It was odd to be invisible. He wondered why the Grand Army didn't use stealth coating on all trooper armour, seeing as most of their land engagements were against droids.

There was a lot that didn't add up in this war.

"There," said Prudii, closing the panel gently. He stood back to inspect it. "We were never here."

They climbed back up to the gantry on their lines and slipped out the way they'd come. It was pitch black outside. They had an hour to get to the extraction point and transmit their coordinates to the heavily , disguised freighter waiting for them. On Olanet, that meant crossing ' . kilometres of marshaling yards serving the nerf-meat industry. Atin ;' % could hear the animals lowing, but he'd still never seen a live nerf.

"This place stinks." Prudii settled behind a repulsor truck in a yard full of hundreds of others and squatted in its shadow. The harmless but nauseating stench of manure and animals penetrated his helmet's filters. "Five-seven, are you receiving?"

"With you in 10, sir. Stand by."

Prudii made no comment about the 'sir.' He took the data wafers out of his belt and attached a probe to them, one at a time. He struck Atin as a

kindred spirit, a man who wouldn't let any inanimate objects get the better of him, but he was still hard work.

"Shab," Prudii muttered. He held but a wafer. "What do you make of this?"

Atin slotted it into his own wafer reader and relayed the extracted data to his HUD. The readout was just strings of numbers, the kind of data he'd need to analyze carefully. "What am I looking at? I normally blow this stuff up. I've never stopped to read it."

"Look for the code that starts zero-zero-five-alpha, 10 from the top row."

"Got it."

"That's the running total of units off the line since the wafer was inserted to start the production run. And the date."

Atin scanned from left to right, counting the line of numbers and inserting imaginary commas. "996,125. In a year."

"Correct."

"Not exactly smoking." Atin checked that he wasn't missing a row of numbers. "No, just six figures."

"Every factory we hit is producing numbers like that. Judging by the raw material freight we monitor, there're still a lot more factories out there, but I think we're talking about a few hundred million droids."

"That's reassuring. Thanks. I'll sleep well tonight."

"And so you should, ner vod." Prudii popped the seal on his collar, lifted off his helmet and wiped the palm of his gauntlet across his forehead; it came away shiny with sweat in the faint light leaking from the HUD. Somehow he looked older than Mereel and Ordo. "They say they're making quadrillions of droids." He paused. "A quadrillion has 15 zeroes. A thousand million millions, not a few hundred. Are we missing something here?"

Atin took no offence at the explanation. Anything more than three million was bad news in his book; that was how many clone troops were deployed or being raised on Kamino. "'They' say? Who're 'they'?"

"Now that's a good question."

"Anyway, it only takes one to kill you."

"But where are they all? I've bimbled around 47 planets this last year." Prudii made it sound like sightseeing. Atin had a sudden vision of him admiring the visitor attractions of Sep planets and then fragmenting them. The grip of the Verpine rifle slung across his back was well-worn. Atin had no real idea who Prudii hunted, and he was happier that way. "Seen a lot, counted a lot. But not quadrillions. They just don't seem to be able to produce anywhere near those numbers."

"But that's why we're fighting, isn't it?" Atin tried not to worry about the HoloNet news and took the political debate as something that didn't matter, because one droid or a septillion, he and his brothers were the ones who would still be in the front line. "Because the Seps are going to overrun us with droid armies if we don't stop them. So why not just reassure the public that the threat isn't that big?"

Prudii looked at him for a moment. Atin got the feeling that he felt sorry for him in some way, and he wasn't sure why. "Because it's only the likes of us that are finding this out every time we crack a Sep facility."

"You report it?"

"Of course I report it. Every time. To General Zey. Mace Windu knows. They all know."

"So why is the holonews news saying quadrillions? Where did the figure come from?"

"I heard it first from Republic Intelligence."

"Well, then..." Intel was notoriously variable in quality. "They make it up as they go along."

"Even they're not that stupid."

Prudii replaced his helmet and held his hand out to Atin for the wafer. He didn't say much after that.

Millions or quadrillions. So what? Atin, a man who enjoyed numbers, looked at the 1.2 million clone troopers deployed at that moment, added the two million men still being raised and trained, and didn't even need to place a decimal point to work out that he didn't like the odds.

But he never did. And it never stopped him from defying them.

"Want me to relay this data to HQ?" he asked.

"No," said Prudii. "Not until Kal'buir sees it. Never until he sees it."

A good Mandalorian son always obeyed his father. The Null ARCs were no different: they looked to Sergeant Kal Skirata - Kal'buir, Papa Kal - for their orders, not to the Republic. A Mando father put his sons first, after all, and they trusted him.

Skirata would always outrank everyone - captain, general-and even Supreme Chancellor.

place and time: tipoca city. kamino -461 days after the battle of Geonosis

Ko Sai was a devious piece of work.

Mereel - ARC trooper N-7 - had always thought of Kaminoans as cold, arrogant, xenophobic, and even suitable for barbecuing, but he'd never seen them as scheming - not until he began hunting their missing chief scientist, anyway. She hadn't died in the Battle of Kamino, as everyone thought. She'd defected.

Why? What motivates her? Wealth? Not politics, that's for sure.

He knew she was still alive, because she was on the run from her Separatist paymasters, now. In the cantinas of Tatooine, he'd heard rumours of a bounty. And when you had only your rare skill in cloning to trade, in a galaxy

where non-military cloning was now banned, your attempts to raise credits were hard to hide from those who knew where to look.

The world of Khomm and Arkania had really suffered from that ban. Mereel knew exactly where to look.

He stood to attention in the ranks of troopers in the Tipoca training facility, a good, obedient clone as far as the Kaminoans were concerned. A perfect product. But their identification systems weren't quite as foolproof as they'd told the Republic. They certainly hadn't spotted his fake ID transponder code. The little chip cycled through randomly generated IDs and, without his distinctive kama and blue-trimmed armour, he could disappear right in front of the kaminiise. Not even the patrolling KE-8 pilots looking for defective clones could spot him.

You think you're infallible, don't you, aiwha-bait?

One of the Kaminoan technicians walked along the row of troopers and paused in front of him, blinking, gray-skinned, its long fragile neck tempting to a man trained to kill. Mereel, frozen at attention, fantasized: blaster, vibroblade or garrote? These vile things had wanted to exterminate him as a kid, and he would never forget that. He and his five brothers had been a cloning experiment the Kaminoans considered a failure: but Kal Skirata had saved them.

There was time for revenge later. Kal'buir had taught him patience.

Patience is a luxury. I'm ageing twice as fast as an ordinary man.

He needed to pass through Tipoca City and grab some data without being noticed. The Kaminoan moved on. Mereel savoured the knowledge that he knew more about chief scientist Ko Sai's whereabouts than the Kaminoans did, and they'd searched for her very, very hard.

You're going to give us back our lives, gihaal, me and all my brothers. Mereel included the Republic commandos, the poor cannon fodder meat-cans around him, and even the Alpha ARCs, who'd been ready to kill clone kids to stop the Seps from using them. An vode. They're all my brothers. Even the Alphas.

As the troopers fell out, he slipped in at the rear of a line of men to cover his progress toward the administration core of the building. One glanced at him, the slightest head movement betraying what was happening under his helmet. The man was probably well aware Mereel was a stranger from the minute telltale differences in gait or bearing, but he said nothing. No clone could possibly be a security risk.

I'm just borrowing some information, ner vod. I'm not even going to sabotage this cesspit of a city. Take no notice of me.

As the line passed a corridor leading off at 90 degrees, Mereel wheeled left and walked calmly down to the end of the passage. The heads-up display in his helmet scrolled floor plans and data before his eyes. He looked both at it and through it to focus on the systems terminal set in the wall. Since the Separatist attack on Tipoca just over a standard year ago, security had been tightened, but that was just for Seps and their droids. Amateurs and tinnies. Nobody could keep out a determined Null ARC.

"Mer'ika," said the voice in his helmet. It was quiet and concerned: Skirata rarely raised his voice to them. "Don't push your luck. I want you back in one piece."

"I hear you, Kal'buir." Mereel slipped the docking pin of his forearm plate into one of the terminal's ports. A couple of troopers looked his way from the end of the passage, but he remained unhurried. I'm just calibrating my suit. "We might not get another chance to come back here. I'm grabbing everything I can."

Along with the legitimate outgoing code that requested data from the Tipoca mainframe, a second hidden layer hitched a ride to access the root of the entire system undetected. Mereel now had Republic Treasury encryption and de-erasure keys, courtesy of an obliging Treasury agent called Besany Wennen, and they were the most advanced available. Now he could read not only Treasury data, but also find encrypted files between Tipoca and the Republic that had been hidden from his previous probes. He might also be able to recover the data that Ko Sai had stolen and deleted.

He wanted her critical research on controlling the ageing process i in humans. It might work both ways, they said. That meant it was worth a fortune. She would try to sell it.

The tree of files appeared in his HUD, a field of flickering amber and blue symbols like a garish fabric. What looked like a plain white wall to humans on Kamino was actually a riot of colour beyond their visual range. Only in the Kaminoans' digital systems did Mereel ever get a glimpse of the way their heptachromatic vision saw the world.

Lots of blue and orange and purple. Tacky. Tasteless.

If he copied just the files he knew he needed, it would take seconds.

You might never get a chance to come back again.

The mainframe held 10 petabytes of data. It would take minutes.

Boots clattered past him. Mereel concentrated on looking like a regular trooper maintaining his armour's systems, but it was hard to stretch a 30-second procedure. He could hear his breath rasping in his helmet. So could Skirata and his brother Ordo, waiting in orbit to extract him.

"You okay, son?"

"Fine, Kal'buir."

"No heroics," said Ordo's voice. "Get out now."

Mereel looked at his HUD icon: still amber, still downloading. He was pushing it, all right. But he'd pushed his luck a lot more for the Republic, and a bunch of strangers and jettiise didn't mean half as much to him as the welfare of his brothers. The amber icon flashed. More boots clattered past the end of the passage.

Come on... Come on...

It was taking too long.

His peripheral vision, enhanced by his helmet's systems, saw the Kaminoan pause and turn to walk towards him. Fierfek. That's all we need.

It was a crested male. It stood in front of him, feigning concern. He knew it only saw him as a commodity.

"You have been downloading longer than average, trooper."

"Just checking, sir." Mereel heard a faint click on his audio feed: Skirata was edgy. "Slow data response times on my HUD."

"Then please proceed to Procurement and have them run diagnostics."

"Yes, sir!" Don't bank on it, aiwha-bait. The icon in his HUD changed to green. "Right away, sir!"

Mereel withdrew the docking pin and walked back down the passage in the general direction of Procurement. The moment the Kaminoan was out of sight, he dropped back into the ocean of whitearmoured bodies and worked his way down the wide corridors and walkways to the maze of service passages that led to lesser-known landing platforms.

Mereel knew every metre of the complex. Skirata had encouraged the Nulls to run wild as kids, much to the disgust of the Kaminoans. He looked into the cloud-locked sky and rain hammered his visor like shrapnel.

"Ready, Kal'buir," he said. "Get me out of this dar'yaim."

place and time: republic special-ops freighter tiv z766/2. cato neimoidia portal. hydian - 461 standard days after the battle of geonosis.

"This wasn't in the op order," said Atin. "We were supposed to sabotage the factory and return to base."

Prudii had ordered the traffic interdiction vessel to Neimoidian space. The pilot didn't seem worried. TIV pilots never did.

"I know," said Prudii. "But this is all about presentation."

"Even this TIV can't take on an armoured transport."

"You sound scared, ner vod. Look at me. No helmet. Would I take a risk without my suit sealed?"

Atin considered showing Prudii where he could dock his character assessment the hard way. "But it's not unreasonable to ask why you're presenting a target to the Seps just to get a few thousand droids that are probably from a spiked batch anyway." He paused for a breath. "Lieutenant."

"No need to stand on ceremony with me, vod'ika." Prudii shrugged. "We're all brothers. Even those unimaginative Alpha planks, Force bless 'em. Why am I doing this? Emphasis, ner vod. Emphasis."

A small, bright spot grew larger in the view plate and resolved into a yellow and gray transport with horizontal spars picked out in scarlet. Prudii let it draw a thousand metres behind the TIV.

"Ready torpedoes," he said.

The pilot tapped the console. "Torps ready."

"Steady..."

The transport was accelerating slowly towards the jump point.

"On my mark..."

He was calculating blast range. Atin could see it.

"Take take take."

"Torps away."

A spread of six proton torpedoes streaked from the concealed tubes in the ship's underslung drive. The TIV shuddered. Atin reminded himself that his Katarn armour and bodysuit was space-tight for 20 minutes, and then realised help would be a lot more than 20 minutes away if anything went wrong. It always was - why did they bother? But Prudii didn't have his helmet on. Either he was confident or he was mad, and being a Null meant he was probably both.

The first and second warheads punched one-two into the transport's starboard flank in a blaze of gold light. Atin didn't see the rest strike because

the TIV accelerated from standstill to way too fast in a matter of seconds, heading for the jump point. It was definitely emphatic.

Stars stretched and streaked before them as the TIV went to hyperspace and left the stricken transport far behind. Prudii wasn't even waiting to confirm a kill. He smiled as the acceleration levelled out and the TIV settled steady again. The pilot yawned. Atin said nothing.

"You're going to tell me what an or'dinii I am for pulling that stunt, aren't you, ner vod?" asked Prudii.

"Pointless bravado." If he took offence, Atin was ready to swing at him. "Reckless, even."

"But it's what the GAR would do if it came across a droid transport and didn't know a lot of tinnies were already as good as useless, isn't it?" Prudii sounded as if he regarded the Grand Army as something separate and external. "I didn't bust my shebs around half the galaxy this past year so the Seps could work out that their tinnies were already sabotaged. So it's worth the risk to make it all look real. If we don't take a pop at them whenever we get the chance, they'll wonder why."

Atin dealt in the measurable and the solid, things he could deconstruct to find out how they worked, and things that he could build. He was trained in camouflage and feint attacks. But the world that the Nulls moved in, the arena of black ops, was a nebulous haze of bluff and counter-bluff. Just when he thought he had the hang of it, they'd do something that was obvious in hindsight but that hadn't occurred to him at the time.

"You think they're that smart?"

"I never underestimate the enemy," said Prudii. "Especially when I'm not sure who the enemy is." He tapped the pilot's shoulder. "Drall RV point, my good man, and make it snappy."

"You Null boys are my favourite fares," said the pilot, and yawned again. "Never a dull moment."

place and time: republic special-ops shuttle. uncoded. en route from kamino to drall RV point corellian space - 461 standard days after the battle of Geonosis.

Mereel swung through the hatch into the crew bay, and Skirata gave him a playful tap on the ear with the flat of his hand.

"Don't do that again," said Skirata. "If those gray freaks had caught you, they'd have reconditioned you."

"They might have tried." Mereel caught Ordo narrowing his eyes in disapproval: Kal'buir was not to be distressed, ever. "Anyway, this could well be worth it."

Safe from detection even by the Republic, they sat in the crew cabin of the unmarked shuttle and pored over the data from Mereel's haul while they waited for Atin and Prudii to rendezvous. They watched the files play out on Ordo's datapad like the latest holovids while the Treasury software from oh-so-helpful Agent Wennen flagged the most heavily encrypted files and those that had been subject to secure erasure.

Mereel was almost joking when he keyed in the search parameter "Palpatine." It was always worth seeing if there was data about key politicians in any files he sliced, just in case, but he didn't expect to find anything.

But he got it.

"Osik," he cursed.

"Problem?" Ordo nudged him.

"Maybe." Mereel stared at a triple-encrypted file that yielded to the Treasury software. But it wasn't a message or a data file; it was a copy of a holotransmission.

He hit the key. It was a frozen holo of Lama Su. Fierfek, it was the Kaminoan Prime Minister, and he appeared to be talking to Chancellor Palpatine.

Skirata swallowed audibly. "Now this is where life gets a bit dangerous."

But they watched, transfixed, as the shimmering blue image of Lama Su sprang to life from the datapad emitter.

"If you require more clones beyond the current order, then you must authorize us to begin further production immediately. An initial payment of one billion credits...."

There was a crackling pause: Palpatine's response wasn't recorded, but it was clear he had interrupted. Lama Su's head bobbed in annoyance.

"We must make it clear that the current Kamino contracts terminate in two years. Apart from the special facilities you ask us to set up on Coruscant, Chancellor, you will have no further clone production beyond the current three million unless you commission more now..."

There was nothing more. It appeared to be all that Lama Su had filed, probably as some kind of personal insurance. If the date was correct, the conversation had taken place some months before.

"Shab," Skirata hissed. "What are they playing at?"

Ordo slowly raised his hand to his mouth. Mereel, who thought he'd seen it all, revised his grasp of political subterfuge on the spot.

"So is the Republic going bust and not paying its bills?" asked Ordo. "Or are we seeing something else?"

"Cloning facilities on Coruscant? General Zey never mentioned that."

"Maybe he doesn't know. There's a lot Zey doesn't know, after all... lots about us, for a start."

"How's the Chancellor going to pull that off?"

Skirata interrupted. "See what else you can find." He'd started chewing ruik root again and Mereel gauged his anxiety by the speed of his jaw. He was going like a machine now. "I don't like this at all."

"If this is all the army we've got for the foreseeable future," said Ordo, "then we'll be overrun in two years."

"Unless Prudii's patent droid remover saves the day," said Mereel, stomach churning.

Why didn't I pick this up earlier?

All Nulls were adept spies, used to knowing more about the Republic's inner workings than the Senate itself. Mereel could even find out the smallest and most private details if he needed to, maybe even how many times Palpatine used the 'freshers each day. He'd thought that no information escaped him. So being surprised by totally unexpected information left him uneasy and ashamed.

"How did I miss this, Kal'buir?" he said, feeling he had let him down.

"You didn't, son," said Skirata. "You found it."

place and time: RV point. drall space. corellia sector - 462 standard days after the battle of geonosis.

Prudii obviously hadn't seen Skirata in a long time. Atin watched, fascinated, as he turned instantly from glib cynic to adoring son, hugging Skirata with a clash of armour plates. He stood back, and Skirata patted his cheek, an indulgent grin spreading across his face.

"I have some interesting data for you, Kal'buir." The two ships hung linked together by a docking tube, a long way from Republic scrutiny as well as the Separatists. They gathered in the crew bay of the smaller TIV. It was a tight fit. "We're still not finding droid numbers like Intel claimed. We have to reassess the nature of the Sep threat."

Atin thought Prudii just meant numbers. It was now obvious that the droid numbers were flawed to say the least. Atin would have been happy to just write that off as Republic Intelligence being di'kute - nobody with any sense expected intel to be accurate anyway - but it seemed to bother all three Nulls a great deal. Ordo and Mereel, their helmets stacked side by side on the deck like two decapitated heads, wore matching frowns of concern.

"Come on, this is supposed to be good news," said Atin.

Ordo shrugged. "Depends where the original estimate came from."

"But what if it turns out to be right?"

Mereel looked mildly exasperated. "If they had even one quadrillion droids, or a tenth of that, we'd know all about it - because they'd use them, and they'd invade Coruscant." He glanced at Skirata, as though waiting for permission to go on. Skirata shook his head. "Anyway, a factory processing more droids than that needs a lot of durasteel and parts, and we'd notice the traffic. We're not seeing quadrillion-ton shipments of ore, metal or components."

"Then it's just Sep propaganda. Everyone talks up their troop strengths."

Atin simply couldn't see why it mattered. They had a better handle on the Sep droid numbers now, and a good strategy, for the time being, for making sure that the millions didn't count for anything like that number on the battlefield. He settled back into an alcove in the port bulkhead and inserted his test probes into the wafer's terminals. He just wanted to see the data for himself, or as much as he understood of it.

"We're fighting small fires all the time, all over the place," said Skirata. "Zey might think these numbers are good news, but it's like saying we're drowning in three metres of water instead of a hundred."

Atin hadn't been raised by Skirata like the rest of Omega Squad, but he knew the man well enough now to read his reactions. He was completely transparent with clones; he didn't seem to be able to deceive them, or even want to. "There's something you're not telling me, Sarge."

Skirata put his comlink on standby. "Yes, son, there is."

"So it is Grievous, then? Because if it is..."

"It's messy politics." Skirata - a contract killer, an accomplished thief, a man who diverted Republic resources whenever he felt like it - would never lie to his boys. He promised them that. "If you know about it, it might endanger you."

Atin wondered what might be more dangerous than being a Republic commando. It wasn't exactly a steady desk job. But he trusted Skirata completely, even if his curiosity was devouring him. "Okay, Sarge. Orders?"

"Get back to HQ with the TIV pilot and do a bit of skills transfer. Teach the rest of the lads how to make nice crumbly droids."

Ordo cut in. "And thank Besany Wennen for me, will you?"

Atin worked out that Prudii wasn't going back with him. "You're telling me to get lost, aren't you?"

"For your own good," said Skirata.

It had to be Grievous. For a moment Atin wondered if they didn't think he was good enough to go after the Separatist general with them, and then he started worrying for Skirata. Even with a bunch of Nulls, the old di'kut would be insane to try to tackle him. And Atin had no intention of walking away if that was on the agenda.

"Straight question, Sarge."

"Don't put me on the spot, At'ika."

"Are you going after Grievous? 'Cos if you are, I'm not leaving."

"No, we're not going after Grievous."

Atin scrutinized his face. "Okay, Sarge. Be careful, anyway. Whatever it is."

He climbed back through the hatch to rejoin the TIV pilot. Most of the time, he really didn't need or even want to know what the Nulls got up to. Or Skirata, for that matter. He just didn't want to lose any more brothers.

And even if he worked out what was going on, it wouldn't change his job one bit.

place and time: rv point. drall space - 462 standard days after the battle of geonosis.

"Okay, what's your assessment?" Skirata prepped the secure link to General Zey back at headquarters. "What are we going to tell him?"

Ordo shrugged. "Nothing about the holorecording - yet."

"We'd be failing in our duty if we didn't advise him to change tactics, though," said Mereel. "Again."

"You know it's not his decision."

"But it's still our duty."

Skirata frowned and opened the secure link. The Jedi general seemed to have been caught on the hop - the holoimage showed him in his undershirt, hair disheveled.

"Another confirmation of droid production numbers, General," said Skirata. "Same as before. Worst scenario, maybe a few hundred million right now."

"That's better than we thought. I needed some good news.

Successfully neutralized?"

"My lads are completely reliable."

"I know."

"We think... look, it's pretty clear from what we're seeing that we're facing small-scale conflicts in waves. If we concentrated all our forces on completely overwhelming them a sector at a time, instead of scattering our troops across a thousand fronts, we could break the Seps a lot faster."

Zey chewed his lip. "I hear what you say."

"A big push. Consolidate our forces and hit 'em hard, then move on when they're crushed and hit the next sector. This piecemeal approach is just damping down fires temporarily."

Mereel waited for Zey's reaction. The Jedi looked tired. It was hard to find anyone in the Grand Army who didn't look in need of a week's sleep.

Zey dropped his voice to a near-whisper. "I agree, militarily. General Windu reminds the Chancellor of this proposal whenever he can. The answer's always the same. Palpatine thinks it'll be seen as excessive force and might alienate the neutral worlds."

Mereel had no patience with politics. "Tell him we're feeling pretty alienated right now, too."

"I understand your frustration, Lieutenant."

"What does he say about the droid numbers, then?"

Zey shrugged. "He believes that underplaying the threat might be foolhardy."

"Always easier to get the voters to foot the bill for a war if they think the enemy's about to invade, eh? Is that why Republic Intel came up with the quadrillions figure?"

"You're a cynical man, Sergeant."

"Yeah. I was a mere for too long."

"I never said you were wrong."

"Okay, General," said Skirata. He managed to sound irritated. Zey knew the game by now; the two of them conducted a coded conversation, both knowing what the other really felt. Mereel admired their pragmatism. "We've not found the hub of the Seps' droid production. I assume you'll want us to carry on looking."

Zey sounded older these days. "The Chancellor is most insistent."

"Understood, General."

Skirata closed the link and stared through Mereel for a moment. Then he focused on him again. "Palpatine doesn't want to talk about the real numbers. Clone production on Kamino looks like it might stop dead in a couple of years. I say the objective of this war isn't the one we're being told it is."

"You sound like you expect politicians to tell the truth, Kal'buir."

"Nah, I'm not that senile yet." Skirata gestured to Ordo for his datapad, fingers beckoning. "We're bringing the plan forward a little, lads. I'm marking a date on my calendar just under two years from now, and making sure we're ready to take care of our own by then. You understand me?"

"Understood," said Mereel. Skirata had what he called an exit strategy: his plan for the end of the war, not just for himself, but for the Nulls... and maybe any clone who found himself out of a job. "Okay, everybody looks for Ko Sai now."

"What about Grievous?"

Ordo handed the datapad to Skirata. "Last time Kom'rk got a fix on him it was leaked information. Someone wants us to find him. Until we work out who and why, we keep a little distance."

"Works for me," said Mereel.

Wars often didn't make sense. He'd read plenty of history, and he'd absorbed Kal'buir's lessons; politicians often made decisions that flew in the face of professional military advice. Whatever the Republic was up to, a long-running war of skirmishes suited Palpatine's purpose.

But it didn't suit Mereel. And it didn't do the mounting numbers of clone casualties any good either. He felt no guilt whatsoever about using the taxpayers' credit to get the best outcome for himself and his brothers, both those in the field now and those to come.

Three million against... how many? Hundreds of millions. They were bad odds, but they weren't impossible, not with the Nulls and a few thousand

commandos around. But working out odds meant being clear who the enemy was, and the more Mereel learned, the less certain he became.

"Cheer up," said Prudii, "Average kill rates are going up all the time. I reckon we can shoot for at least 200-to-one." He took a hand-size slab of metal out of his pack and held it up with a grin. Then he smacked it down hard on the edge of the console. It crazed and broke into pieces. "Those tinnies just can't take the strain like we can."

No, those weren't impossible odds. Bad, maybe; but not impossible. Mereel sat back in the co-pilot's seat, took out his datapad, and began combing through the hidden data of Kamino's clonemaster. Ko Sai had the whole galaxy in which to hide, but she was hiding from men she had personally engineered to be the very best.

The odds weren't in her favour.

Republic Holonet News

CORE EDITION | 14:9:01

SEPARATISTS ATTACK SHELTER BASE

DOZENS KILLED; GENERAL KENOBI MISSING

SHELTER BASE, JABIIM-A sudden attack by Separatist-backed local forces ravaged the Republic's Shelter Base in the second week of open hostilities on the Outer Rim world of Jabiim, resulting in dozens of casualties and the possible loss of theater commander General Obi-Wan Kenobi.

The attack comes after a string of successful Republic pushes that took three Separatist defensive positions-Camp Aurek, Point Down, and Outpost Shear. These advancements weakened Shelter Base's defenses, as Republic troops were moved farther from headquarters to secure the outlying Jabiimite posts.

Intelligence reports failed to detect the Confederacy military equipment, and up until the attack, no hard evidence of a Confederacy presence had been found. The Jabiimite Separatists were employing native soldiers and equipment. Throughout the Jabiim engagement, long-range orbital scanning

has been hampered by atmospheric disturbances, resulting in incomplete intelligence.

Under the cover of a night storm, Confederacy hailfire droids unleashed volleys of tanksmasher missiles into the compound. The initial assault claimed 32 clones, all from the 43rd "Killer-Aiwha" Battalion, and there are three confirmed Jedi deaths: Dalnus Cam, Sana-Jis Ilowa, and Rallcema Bylissura.

Atmospheric disturbances prevented the use of gunship air support, and Jabiiim's muddy surfaces hampered the effectiveness of the Republic AT-ATs, AT-TEs and other armor.

Partial holographic feeds have confirmed that Alto Stratus, the local Separatist leader, personally led the attack. In addition to battle droid infantry, Stratus led an undisclosed number of elite Nimbus soldiers into the assault.

These same feeds have confirmed General Kenobi's presence during the attack, but contact with Jabiiim has been lost, and Kenobi has yet to check in as per schedule. The Jedi Council has refrained from comment regarding speculation that the theater commander might be among the dead.

As of this report, the fighting continues at Shelter Base. Contact has currently been lost with HNN field correspondent Angus Laride and Jabiiimite Loyalist Front spokesbeing Orliss Gillmunn. Stay tuned to this feed for live updates.

MASTER WINDU LIBERATES SKOR II

METROBIG CITY, SKOR II-King Ebareebaveebee-dee of the Squib Polyanarchy has proclaimed Jedi Master Mace Windu an honorary "Big Time Hero of Beyond-Squib Eliteness" today, and unveiled a bronzium statue of the Jedi Master to a crowd of appreciative citizenry.

Windu led a contingent of clone troopers in liberating the Metrobig Interplanetary Blastport from an occupational force of Confederacy battle droid infantry. The Separatists had planned on using Skor II as a launch-point for an operation that would have littered the outer Rimma Trade Route with proximity mines.

"His Mace Windship will forever haunt Squibbish poems and jingles, and future fuzzlings will hear of the valiant Knight with his koovy purplish blade," declared the King.

Mace Windu has since left Skor II and was unavailable for the ceremony. A clone trooper peacekeeping force has remained behind to monitor Separatist activity. The Jedi Council offered no comment on the ceremony

Republic Holonet News

CORE EDITION | 14:9:04

REPUBLIC YOUTHS HOLD PATRIOT PARADE

MONUMENT PLAZA, CORUSCANT-In a display of pageantry and patriotism, over 6,000 young Republic loyalists marched from the Jrade-Daders Concourse to the newly reopened Monument Plaza, celebrating Republic victories in the ongoing war and the reopening of the historic landmark.

The patriots, aged between 13 and 17 standard years, were members of SAGroup, the youth chapter of the increasingly popular Commission for the Protection of the Republic (COMPOR). Consisting of color guards of various ranks, the young volunteers marched in precise military order, carrying banners of the Republic loyalist worlds.

Monument Plaza, the public concourse of the Menerai historic site, had been closed since 13:4:25, when an anonymous terrorist corn-call identified the popular tourist attraction as a target. With a dedicated unit of clone trooper guards protecting the ancient outcropping of naked

Coruscant rock, the facility opened again. In addition to the 6,000 youths, over 10,000 civilians were in attendance, and the ceremony was broadcast live throughout the Core Worlds.

At the end of the march, the youths assembled at the North Garden. There, brigade leader Nenevanth Tion, a 15-year-old junior noble from Lianna, recited a speech from the Kitel Phard Dynasty of the Atrisi system. Invoking the ancient words of the 54th Emperor, Uueg Tching, Tion quoted from a speech regarding the routing of corruption.

"Even the greatest of trees can rot from within, but the vigilant gardener keeps attentive to the signs of decay," recited Tion. "The Gardener is not afraid to cut through the polished skin to tear away a malignant heart, to save the life of that tree. Those who seek shade under that tree would best remember the work of that gardener."

The youths then sang the central passage of Dha Verda Werda, the ancient Coruscant epic poem from the pre-Republic era.

Connected live via holocom, Supreme Chancellor Palpatine addressed the audience to boisterous cheers. "It pleases me deeply to see such loyalty to the ideals of the Republic. It is the strength of this new generation that will lift us from the quagmire of treachery. I am inspired by your vision. It is this generation that will bring a new order to this chaos."

The youth organization has drawn recent media criticism because its membership is composed almost entirely of humans. To date, non-humans makeup less than five percent of the ranks, and of the aliens that have been admitted, all are of near-human descent.

"This is sensationalist nonsense," insisted Crueya Vandron, advisor to the Supreme Chancellor. "These echelons that gathered today mark the first generation of the SAGroup brigadiers. We cannot help that the first to join happened to be of human descent. We have non-human applicants, to be sure. Their applications are still under review."

CIS Shadowfeed

Dispatch 14:9:08 Edition

Bootleg Holos Build Stratus as Hero

Jabiim Leader Popularity Spreads

OUTER RIM NODE-Despite data-interception efforts from Republic Intelligence, bootleg holos of Alto Stratus are finding their way off Jabiim, and are proliferating throughout neighboring Outer Rim sectors.

The charismatic leader of the Jabiimite Separatist movement is becoming a folk hero among Outer Rim Separatist worlds, as his powerful words are disseminated throughout local communication networks.

The hologram, taken by a local Jabiimite freedom fighter on the eve of Stratus' devastating attack of the Republic's ill-prepared Shelter Base, runs 12 standard minutes long. Though many of the points that Stratus uses to rally his troops are germane to Jabiim's struggle for independence, his speech has served to rally other worlds.

On Clak'Dor VII, famed Bith musician Vennido T'all has composed an original song sampling portions of the speech. On Yag'Dhul, the First Temple of Prime has mathematically converted the Stratus' words into a fractal banner. The xenophobic Aqualish, entrenched in a civil war on Ando, have even shown respect for Stratus as variations of his speech have appeared in local literature and war-chants.

A full decrypted edition of the speech is available for download at port 310 on this feed circuit. Shadowfeed users are cautioned that Republic authorities consider the possession of this data a crime.

The Words of Stratus - An Excerpt

"The Republic would have its people believe their enemies are heartless droids. We are not droids. We are farmers, and menders, builders and healers. We are fathers, brothers, mothers, and sisters who have been forced to take up arms to challenge a selfish and corrupt government.

"The emotionless cultists of the Jedi order and their vat-grown drones are fighting a widowless war. We fight for our lifeblood, our heritage, and our soil.

"Your planet, your home, is flooded with blood. For three thousand years, we were loyal to the Republic. But did they send aid during the Brainrot Plague? Did they react when the Trandoshans invaded? Where were the Jedi when Lythian Pirates killed your parents and mine? The Republic ignored our cries for help until they learned that beneath all the mud our planet has a heart of ore! We will fight to defend our planet! We will send the Jedi home in body bags!"

Friendly Fire Hills Diplomatic Envoy

SLUIS SECTOR NODE-Sensor analysis has confirmed that friendly fire destroyed the Republic peace delegation sent to Sluis sector, and not Confederacy cannons as reported in the mainstream media. A conference of Republic and Confederacy diplomats convened at a neutral subspace relay station near Praesitlyn to discuss a cease-fire in the Seswenna-Sluis conflict. Republic HoloNet News reported that Confederacy sabotage destroyed the station, which led to a barrage o laser exchange between warring starships. Analysis of sensor data con firms that the Republic ships had begun powering and firing weapon before the complete destruction of the station. "The Republic is not interested in peace," said Candobar Inglet, the Sluissi Khedive. "They were far too ready to pull the trigger that day."

CIS Shadowfeed

Dispatch 14:9:15 Edition

Republic Installs Regional Governor on Brentaal

CORMOND, BRENTAAL IV-Bypassing any pretense of democracy, the Republic has installed loyalist Jerrod Maclain to serve as regional governor of the conquered Brentaal system. The planet fell months ago to a concerted Jedi attack that toppled Confederacy theater commander Shogar Tok.

Maclain arrived on Brentaal last week and has set up office in the recently rebuilt Ruling House in Cormond. His appointment was made official this morning with a speech broadcast on Brentaal's planetary nets outlining his "15-point" plan to bring Brentaal back into the Republic's fold.

"This is a provisional government," said Maclain, at the conclusion of his speech. "It is here for the duration of the emergency. Once the ruling Houses of Brentaal have been carefully sifted of any traitors in their ranks and their loyalty to the Republic has been reaffirmed, Brentaal will return to its former state, perhaps even stronger than before."

Maclain's appointment replaces the planet's former Senatorial representative, Arcel Mosbree, who is now in Republic custody.

Maclain's new programs have exhibited sweeping authority over Brentaal, with unilateral decisions trumping long-standing government policy. The vast

warehouse cities of private materiel captured in the war have now been turned over into Republic hands, including major supply depots once used by the Trade Federation and the Corporate Alliance.

The Republic has nationalized HavaKing, once a satellite signatory of the Techno Union, and reprocessed and redistributed its assets for military consumption.

Alarmingly, this is the second regional governor installed in the area this month. Governor Griff Takel was appointed to the world of Esseles, in the Darpa sector, after the local uprising overthrew that planet's Confederacy presence.

Droid Reclamation Plants Opened on Gyndine

YRACTOS, GYNDINE-The Republic has opened another new droid reclamation plant, this time on the planet Gyndine. Huge shipments of captured and damaged battle droids are ferried to an industrial sector of this planet, where their memories are sucked clean of any information, and their body-shells are melted down for raw materials to fuel the Republic war machine.

Reports of such facilities have been increasingly common following a highly publicized raid by the Coalition of Automaton Rights Activists on Ryloth. Wilam Olgreen, leader of the radical Olgreen Intelligence Guild, led a team of thirty followers in erecting a portable shield generator that prevented a Republic freighter from delivering its war spoils.

Contrary to Republic reports, the Olgreen Intelligence Guild has no connection to the Confederacy.

Year's Start Fete Day Edition

Dooku's Address to the Confederacy

A partial transcript of the carrier-wave broadcast made by Count Dooku, leader of the Confederacy, has eluded Republic censors. The work of expert slicers saw the transmission distributed via Republic-sanctioned Fete Day messages. Despite the best efforts of Republic Intelligence, the message continues to propagate.

"The Republic citizenry gathers to celebrate the start of a new year, but all around them is undeniable evidence of what they have lost. Curfews and armed patrols choke what was, in days past, a joyous occasion. Instead of rebirth and renewal, this new year brings the Republic closer to its inevitable demise.

"Another year is snuffed by time, yet the fire of our spirits continue to burn. We challenge the Republic, for it is a failure. It denies us our sovereignty and the right to govern ourselves free of corruption. It has instigated an unjust war and brought death to countless worlds on the fringes of its domain, worlds that simply wish to determine their own fate.

"The Jedi have been deceived. They are too close to the Senate to see otherwise. I know, for in my time within the order, I saw the rampant abuses in the corridors of power. Now, the Jedi have had their hands soiled by this bid for control. Three days ago, the Judiciary relinquished jurisdiction of wartime tribunals to the Council, making the Jedi sole arbiters of their enemies' fates. All in the name of security, it is said.

"The Republic brands us cowards for our continued relocation, but it is they who cower behind the facade of security on Coruscant, while our roots drive deep on worlds scattered throughout the galaxy. This only serves to make them a target, and mark me, Coruscant will feel the sting of the Confederacy before we ever consider yielding.

"The Separatist Council has once again moved to an undisclosed and secure location to manage the war, and govern the distribution of vital assets to our thousands of member worlds. Though we have had setbacks on vital worlds, we will avenge the defeats on Muunilinst and Metalorn, and strike back with renewed spirit. Our droid armies, under unfaltering command by the most proven of Generals, are indefatigable. Our flesh-and-blood soldiers have iron wills bolstered by the knowledge that they fight for the truth.

"This new year is the eve of our victory, when the Republic will no longer continue, where reform will excise the rot, and where a new union will bring justice to the galaxy. I have foreseen it."

A Soldier's Story: The Blast Shield

You know the problem with those Z-95s? They're so tough they give the higher-ups bad ideas. Back in the Clone Wars, the Seppies captured Ongary IX, looking for hfredium. They took over the mines and converted the central shafts into starfighter bases, with hot and cold running Vulture droids pouring out at dusk and dawn to make trouble.

I was a pilot in the Ividal Sector Forces — Foxfire Squadron — when the Republic came calling. They had ground troops, but they needed their fighter squadrons over at Uvadala, so they came our way looking for dirt flyers. It sounded fine to me at first — smack some tinnies around and show the brass on Coruscant that us natural-borns could fight too. I didn't know they planned to turn our Headhunters into bombers. They tricked the birds out with burrowing plasma charges — two-stage missiles from Arakyd. First came a plasma warhead that made a crater, then a shaped charge that arrowed into the hole it had made. I swear you could drill through a moon with the things. The problem was the plasma warhead was *bright*. Brighter than the weapon docs had figured, I guess. First hop we ran with them, my wingman Jens's blast visor completely polarized from the flash; he angled his bird straight into the deck while trying to get his helmet off. Second hop, Rafana was flying lead, wearing that fancy bucket of his with the integrated HUD. The flash scrambled the HUD, filling his vision with random characters, and he got stitched by a Vulture.

A day before the third hop, they collected our helmets and brought them back with blast shields you could flip down over your face. I'd like to meet the glit-biter that put these things together — the shield was huge, and when I flipped it down the hinge practically pushed the bridge of my nose back into my skull. They told us to keep the blast shield up until it was time to fire the charges, snap it down, then pop it back up when the flash had dissipated. They said next hop they'd wire a HUD in there, but for now it was just plastoid.

I should have lit out right there, but I wanted to show them Jorn Kulish didn't scare. So I took the helmet they'd ruined and got in my Z — never mind that I looked like a reed-geese with that shield sticking straight out from my head, or that the thing kept bumping into the canopy during preflight.

We got our targets, fought through a screen of Vultures, fired our warheads and then slapped the blast shields down. It's pitch black and I'm flying a Z-95

Headhunter 30 meters off the deck through a furball, but seeing's overrated, right? It was eight seconds before the warheads vectored in and I saw the flashes leaking around the shield. Eight seconds of complete blindness.

It felt like eight hours.

And then I couldn't get the blast shield back up — the thing was *stuck*. And so, yeah, I panicked. Can you blame me? The Z-95's yawing while I'm trying to get the thing off, looking like a frog-dog with its head in a bucket. After 10 or 15 seconds I finally got the chin strap loose and yanked my helmet off, just in time to see a kriffing *mountain* going by two meters to starboard.

Because my commo gear had come off with my helmet, it took me 20 minutes to figure out we'd imploded the mine, bringing the Seppies' whole base down on top of them. The next day they loaded our Zs on a Venator headed back to Ividal. But I'd already decided I wasn't getting back in the cockpit, not after that. Instead I got my duffel and grabbed a ride Coreward with these two scruffy-looking Republic agents aboard a YT-1300. The *Stellar Envoy*, they called her — and she was faster than a nerf being chased with a frying pan.

It was only when I'd disembarked on Denon that I realized I'd left my helmet aboard — I'd brought it out to show Jadak and Reeze why I quit. Maybe one of those barves found a use for it, though I can't imagine what that might be. With the blast shield down you can't even see — how are you supposed to fly?

Quinlan Vos Recording

Count Dooku told me that the Holocron had been constructed by an old Sith Lord named Darth Andeddu. I've never touched a Sith Holocron before, but this one didn't feel anything like a Jedi Holocron. It's not just that it's shaped like a pyramid and its surface was etched with unusual markings, apparently Sith hieroglyphs and incantations. The Holocron felt hot and cold at the same time, and I sensed something malevolent about the energy that charged the thing. I only held it briefly, but it made me feel uneasy, even a little queasy. Dooku said the Holocron would give him "access to the long-dead wisdom of Darth Andeddu, the wisdom and the power of the Sith." Dooku hasn't told me what he plans to do with this knowledge, but I doubt it's for anything good.

When I held the Holocron, I couldn't feel any obvious release mechanism, but Dooku seemed to know just how to open it, or certainly didn't have any problem doing so. The upper part of the Holocron held a red crystal that—according to Dooku—once powered Darth Andeddu's lightsaber. Dooku gave the crystal to me, told me to use it to power my own lightsaber. Aside from making the blade blaze red, I can't say that the crystal has any other effect. My weapon cuts like it always has.

Still, the way Dooku popped open the Sith Holocron, it seems likely that he had previous experience. Maybe someone in Archives should look into his background a bit more, and also find out if there's anything on Darth Andeddu.

VIRUJANSI PROCLAIM SKYWALKER "WARRIOR OF THE INFINITE"

UNPARALA, VIRUJANSI-The once-gleaming marble edifice of the Palace of Splendid Harmony, home of the ruling Ever Radiant Throne of Virujansi, still bore soot-stains and blast-marks from a Separatist attack as the royal court held a special ceremony to elevate Jedi Anakin Skywalker to the level of "Warrior of the Infinite" today.

The nameless Rajah, speaking through the royal court's Mouth of the Ancestors, read the ancient text of proclamation. "There seem to be no limits to this remarkable young man," said the Rajah, switching to modern Basic as he ended his speech. "Jedi Skywalker has already rightly earned the title 'Hero With No Fear' in his exploits in battle. He is an unparalleled leader and a pilot without equal." Although the title offers Skywalker no practical benefits on Virujansi or elsewhere, it is a revered rank only bestowed 29 times in the 6,000-year history of the royal court.

Skywalker and his commanding officer General Obi-Wan Kenobi had been dispatched to Virujansi six days ago to combine their clone troopers and the local militia into a combined force to throw off a Separatist occupation. Skywalker personally led a joint squadron of clone trooper starfighter pilots and the Rarefied Air Cavalry, using the giant borecrawler cave network that permeates the Hollow Mountains to confound the Confederacy droid vulture fighters in close-quarter cavern dogfights. Without air support, the Confederacy army, consisting of battle droids and Gossam commandos, was decimated by Kenobi's initiative.

Reporters gathered from throughout the sector were unable to ask Skywalker about past exploits on Jabiim or Kamino as General Kenobi excused him from the conference to attend to "other pressing business." The well-regarded Jedi heroes are next shipping out to the Grumani sector to investigate increasing Separatist military activity there.

The Jedi Council has traditionally avoided public accolades, but as the war progresses, participation in such recognition has becoming increasingly common. Media analysts postulate this is a deliberate attempt by the Jedi to

build public opinion during the trying times of galactic conflict. "It sounds absurd, sure, but you can't deny that the Jedi are getting more and more coverage in the holomedia," says Androosin Liann, host of the popular Eriadu talk show Essense. "Maybe it's the Republic. Maybe it's the Council. It's as if someone is looking for a poster boy, and I don't think you can do much better than Skywalker."

SEPARATISTS SEIZE SHIPYARD PLANS

CORAL CITY, MON CALAMARI¹-Although ongoing combat engagements in the Mon Calamari system have kept the watery world from falling completely into the Separatist fold, reports from the Mon Calamari Council have confirmed that vital technical data is now in Confederacy hands.

An unidentified sheer or party of slicers raided the main information network of the Mon Calamari shipyards and absconded with classified engineering documents, starship plans, and performance data. Officials believe the attack to have been spurred by agents of the Techno Union, who have long attempted to persuade the Mon Calamari ship-builders to join the guild.

Senator Tundra Dowmeia has been assisting Republic authorities in tracking down the slicers and examining security weaknesses in the Mon Calamari defenses.

Republic Holonet News

CORE EDITION | 15:01:13

NEW MON CALAMARI COUNCIL PROMISES REFORM

MORJANSSIK CITY, MON CALAMARI - After months of violence and strained diplomatic relations, the governments of Mon Calamari took steps to move beyond the civil war of last year with the signing of a new accord between the two dominant species of the water planet. Though open hostilities ceased as of 13:9:22 - the day a Republic task force destroyed a Separatist-funded Quarren weapons program - the purge of seditionist elements from the ruling Mon Calamari Council has taken a year to accomplish.

Jedi Master Kit Fisto, leader of last year's task force, was in the Quarren city of Morjanssik to oversee the signing of the accord. In a gesture meant to show

the significance of the agreement, Quarren Senator Tundra Dowmeia signed the document in his own ink.

"The Quarren Isolation League is no more, and the exploitation of our people will end now," Dowmeia said in his resonating baritone voice to a predominantly Quarren audience. "The new government of Mon Calamari will more properly reflect the will of our planet, not the will of the guilds that grew rich from our work."

"The Quarren who previously sat on the Council did not speak for the dwellers of the surfaces or the depths," Mon Calamari Councilor Kalbrac explained to off-world media. "With the corruption now flensed from this body, the new government will function as a voice for all the planet, Mon Calamari and Quarren alike."

The new accord radically restructures the makeup of the Mon Calamari Council. Though constitutionally mandated to represent the Quarren and Mon Calamari people equally, the Council has for decades been rife with corruption. In planetary affairs and within the Galactic Senate, the last three Senators have had strong ties to the Mining Guild, which perpetuated an isolationist policy to deter competition in the planet's lucrative deep-sea ore-mining operations.

Though the Mon Calamari support this move, the Quarren see it as yet another blight on Senator Dowmeia's record. "Dowmeia is a tool of the Republic and the Cals," says Ruke Chowall, editor of *Bends*, a Quarren counterculture newsnet popular in Morjanssik. "He's going to sell out our mines to the Mon Cals and open our seas to who-knows-what. Mark my words: Before long, these seas will be bloodied again."

Valorum memorial unveiled to tightened security

JRADE DISTRICT, CORUSCANT-After repeated delays attributed to the newly heightened Core Worlds Security Act, this afternoon finally saw the unveiling of Finis Valorum Memorial in the Jade District of Galactic City to a meager crowd of fewer than 200 spectators.

The Jade Plaza surrounding the newly commissioned marcluro-stone statue has in the past held tens of thousands of spectators, but today's sparse gathering was dominated instead by the presence of clone troopers and Senate Guard security.

"Of course there should be more people here to pay their respects and remember former Supreme Chancellor Valorum today," said Senator Mon Mothma (Chandrila), "But I imagine the nonstop Beta-level security alerts and endless clone patrols are keeping people indoors."

Though a memorial to Finis Valorum had been approved and planned for the Jrade Plaza Chancellery Walkway immediately following his death in the terrorist attack of 14:9:19, the plaza's public shutdown for security investigations delayed the unveiling for weeks.

"We've been trying to let people know that the Jrade is once again open," said Dassa Borkannits, Director of Communications for the District. "I guess people are still shaken up by it all."

Senator Bail Organa (Alderaan) read the dedication to Valorum: "In the days following the tragic and cowardly attack that claimed the life of this man, the news of our loss was overshadowed by the security policies that it spawned," said Organa. "But Finis Valorum would never have backed such extreme reactionary measures and would have seen them as affronts to the freedoms he held dear."

CIS Shadowfeed

Dispatch 15:01:15 Edition

Ventress Issues New Jedi Bounties

MID-RIM NODE-In Shadowport newsnets and unofficial HoloNet nodes throughout the Mid-and Outer Rims, the newest collection of CIS bounty postings is quickly working its way to independent bounty hunters. This latest update of 82 notices of remandation comes from Commander Asajj Ventress and is dominated by Jedi warrants.

"Hunters of the fringe, I address you on behalf of the Count and the General, leaders of our unyielding cause," said Ventress in the holo-recording that precedes the latest bounty packets. "You've long been used to working outside the system, for you recognize its flaws. Strike back at these outdated enforcers and bureaucrats who seek to govern your livelihood."

On Nar Shaddaa, independent hunters have lined up at pirate HoloNet kiosks to download the latest bounties. As these bounties are posted outside the legislation of the Republic Office of Criminal Investigations, they are viewed as illegal in Republic space, and the typical permit restrictions and zone laws that regulate the bounty hunting trade do not apply.

"An unofficial bounty doesn't have guild fees, taxes, and other creds skimmed off the top," says a Vuvrian hunter who wished not to be named. "There's catches, though. No rules means you get a lot of amateurs stepping in your way. And you get paid in confed-creds."

"It takes a special breed of hunter to nab a Jedi, and the Seps aren't too demanding since they're not asking for live prisoners," said an Aqualish hunter who identified himself as Krag. "You got to watch your back and strike from a distance, or else you'll end up getting Jangoed."

Topping this bounty list are Jedi Generals Mace Windu and Yoda, each valued at 1,250,000 credits. Notable additions and increases to the list include General Obi-Wan Kenobi (350,000 credits), General Ki-Adi-Mundi (350,000 credits), and General Shaak Ti (300,000 credits). The highest-valued non-General is Padawan Anakin Skywalker (225,000 credits), who gained notoriety following his exploits on Skye, Virujansi, and Aargonar.

The new postings packet also includes loyalist politicians influential to the Republic war machine. These include Senator Ask Aak of Malastare (17,000 credits), Senator Orn Free Taa of Ryloth (16,000 credits), and Senator Onaconda Farr of Rodia (25,000 credits). Senator Padme Amidala of Naboo has the highest bounty of the loyalists, although her extraordinary death mark of 22,000,000 credits comes direct from Viceroy Nute Gunray of the Trade Federation.

Givin Lured to Republic Astrogation Program

DODECAPOLIS, YAG'DHUL-Senator Daggibus Scoritoles of Yag'Dhul confirmed today that the Republic has been covertly recruiting Givin theoretical astrogators into its ranks in what is amounting to an "astrogation race" in the Clone Wars.

"Our internal computations have shown that greater than 125 accredited Givin theorists, including four sanctified mathematicians, have been drafted into

companies that are fronts for Republic military operations and are now at work attempting to crack hyperspace speed barriers and compute even faster routes for the enemy," Scoritoles told the Yag'Dhul media. This figure has since been confirmed by the Separatist Council.

"It's not just bigger cannons and faster ships that will win this war," said Techno Union Foreman Wat Tambor. "The importance of leading-edge astrogational data and hyperspatial calculations cannot be overstated. With the correct transdimensional computations, a skilled astrogator could conceivably move a warship across the galaxy in a fraction of the standard duration."

The ruling Body Calculus, the government of Yag'Dhul, has devoted its most talented astrogators to developing newer and faster hyperspace routes for the Confederacy.